



Auld Lang Syne

Should old acquaintances be forgot?



WRITTEN AS A 'NOVEL IN A DAY'
ON JANUARY 26th 2019

Auld Lang Syne

written as a
Novel-in-a-Day



AULD LANG SYNE

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Time is no substitute for talent

There is a well-known saying that if you give a monkey a typewriter and an infinite amount of time then it will eventually produce the complete works of Shakespeare. In 2003, the staff at Paignton Zoo gave a computer to six crested macaques and categorically proved that what you actually get is five pages of the letter 'S' and a broken keyboard. Time, it seems, is no substitute for talent. But can talent substitute for time...?

The book you are about to read was written over the course of a single day in January 2019. For those unfamiliar with the concept of Novel-in-a-Day, it's simple:

- A skeleton of a plot is worked out in advance of the day
- That plot is broken into sections, which are divided amongst the participants randomly
- The writers have most of the rest of the day to write and return their chapters, working with no knowledge of the wider story or their place in it.

I hope you enjoy reading the book as much as we loved putting it together.

Tim

January 26, 2019

Auld Lang Syne

chapter one

Dan Hallberg

JANUARY 2019

Time to see how I'm fucked today.

When I started at this job, I used to check my work email constantly when I was out of the office. I finally had to stop doing it. It was stressing me out too much, and my wife said I was always staring at my phone.

An unintended consequence of this policy is that for the last ten minutes of my commute into the office, every day, a knot the size of a softball forms in my stomach. I know that once I get out of my car, walk through the lobby, hop in that elevator and start up to the 20th floor where my office is located that I have to pull out my phone. Once I pull out the phone, I have to open the app that has my work email account on it. That's when I see the string of emails from people who work later than me and catch my mistakes.

Most of the time there isn't anything too bad. Mostly follow-up emails on accounts I'm working on, or my boss checking in on a client who had called. Occasionally though

someone will catch something I fucked up on a month ago that hasn't been caught until that night. That means an email to me with my boss's email address in the "cc:" line, chewing me out and asking me why I didn't do something that I should have known to do.

It also means that I have to start busting my ass the moment I walk through the door. No cup of coffee. No chit chat with Sasha at reception. No checking in on how the Bulls did last night. No scroll through Twitter to catch up on what the hell our President said last night. No quick Facebook convo with Lucy. Just a rush to pull my ass out of the fire.

I unlock the screen and swipe over three homescreens to where the app is hidden on my phone and fire it up. Two emails from our IT departments spam filter letting me know I could be making \$9,000 a day taking surveys for Google, and an alert from UPS letting me know that the report I yesterday had indeed gotten to its destination this morning. The knot in my stomach releases. Today is going to be a good day then.

"Hey Matt, how's the rugrat," Sasha asks me as she pulls the tea bag out of her cup and pours in a little cream, "I saw that picture you posted last night, looked like she had quite the art project going."

"Yeah, no kidding," I say as I roll my eyes. Hannah was working on some assignment last night. I don't know the details too well, but it involved a lot of glitter that ended up in a lot of places. Among those places was both my wife and I's Instagram feeds.

"I think I'm going to be coughing the stuff up for a month."

"At least it's Friday though, you'll have all weekend to clean."

"Oh yeah, that's exactly how I wanted to spend my

weekend: vacuuming glitter out of the vents before the blowers kick on and it looks like a disco ball went through a woodchipper in my living room.” Sasha laughed, and covered her mouth to avoid a spit take. She’s only 26, so when she doesn’t laugh at my jokes I feel old, and when she does laugh I feel hip.

I drop my coat and bag off at my desk, then head to the break room to grab a cup of coffee. As I pour my cup I see that the cleaning people hadn’t been through last night. There are still a few leftover copies of my proposed portfolio for our potential new client sitting in the recycle bin. I think the pitch went well. The new client was just a kid sitting on trust fund money, so a simple plan to make sure his piggy bank didn’t run out seemed to make the most sense. He looked bored mostly, but his lawyer seemed to be following and receptive. Must be nice to just be able to live off Mommy and Daddy’s hard earned money for your entire life.

I head to my desk, fire up my computer and pop open my Outlook to see if anything fresh has popped in since my trip to the break room. Nothing new. I lean back, sip my coffee, and do my standard catch up of everything on the internet. I make sure the Bulls are still terrible, and they are. The Pacers lost their best player for the season on Wednesday and Alison is still in mourning. I’m a little relieved honestly. The last time one of her teams won a Championship was when her Colts beat my Bears for the Super Bowl. It was a little over a year into our relationship, and frankly, I’m surprised it survived.

Over on Twitter it looks like the President is still an ass. Flip over to Facebook. Looks like cousin Phil went on a jpeg posting spree. Looks like Lucy went out last night for “Thirsty Thursdays” at the barcade in Wrigleyville. I see she’s active on messenger and decide to check in.

MATT GREEN: Lucy.

LUCY WHITFIELD: Yes Matt.

MATT GREEN: Manage to beat my Joust score last night?

LUCY WHITFIELD: I dunno, did you manage to get all of the glitter out of your ass last night?

MATT GREEN: So that's a no?

LUCY WHITFIELD: Correct, and you know it. Same for you as well?

MATT GREEN: Unfortunately yes. On the plus side, if today was the day I decided to bang a stripper today, I'd have a good excuse for all the glitter in my car.

The messenger window lets me know that Lucy is typing, which means she either started typing something and got interrupted by someone at her office, or she typed a dirty joke and is trying to decide whether or not to send it.

LUCY WHITFIELD: Aw shit, tonight's the only night? You know I only work the pole on Saturdays. Think you'll still have glitter all over your car then?

MATT GREEN: Lol. Sorry it'll all be cleaned up by then. You'll have to fill some other guy's back seat with glitter.

LUCY WHITFIELD: Lol. Missed my shot I guess. Next time.

MATT GREEN: Don't know if there will be one. Al thought it was funny until her black suit looked like something out of Rupaul's Drag Race. I think glitter is banned now.

LUCY WHITFIELD: Oh Al, so sensible.

LUCY WHITFIELD: Guess I should get back to work now.

MATT GREEN: Guess I should start work now.

LUCY WHITFIELD: Lol. Later.

I manage to get through the morning doing the bare minimum of work. Honestly, it's all I can manage after putting in so many extra hours putting together the pitch for the trust fund baby. My brain needs a break. Plus today's Friday, and on Fridays I get lunch out, which means my brain is thinking about nothing but a quality hot dog until after 1:00 PM. A few years ago eating out meant I'd hit up the build your own stir-fry place a block over for lean meat and veg over brown rice, but since we had Hannah that has devolved into the much more satisfying all-beef Chicago dog, plus a polish with grilled onions. I do skip the fries at least.

My favorite hot dog place is about 2 blocks away, so at 11:55 I get bundled up and head out.

"Hey, has Wendy gotten a hold of you? She just got in from a meeting across town and Josh said she was trying to find you." Sasha asks.

"No, not yet. I'll check in when I get back, she knows I take a lunch."

"I wish I could have that attitude. I'm always jumping at anything Wendy asks for."

"Honestly, that's probably the better plan, but what can I say, lunch is calling."

Sasha grins and goes back to eating something that I am sure is devoid of any kind of animal product. I'm not sure what diet she's devoted to now, but if it's that stuff or a heart attack, I'll take the heart attack.

My eyes and cheeks are the only uncovered part of my body at the moment and the wind cuts directly into them. I was hoping it would get above double digits today, but it looks like the weather has other plans. I tear up from the wind and

cold by the time I get to the hot dog place, which unfortunately has a line out the door.

I fiddle around on my phone. Lucy sent me a gif of glitter and another of a pole dancer. I forward the glitter gif on to Alison who responds with a thumbs down. I see my Mom reposted the picture of Hannah and all of her girlfriends are letting her know how cute she looks and how glad they are that it didn't happen at their houses. Lines moving slow. Looks like they're short behind the counter. Soon enough, I look at my phone and it's 12:40. I was hoping to eat in, but even if I was next in line, which I'm not, by the time I got my food and got back to the office, it'd be 1:00.

With my boss waiting for me, I know I should get back, but I worked hard this week, and I want my lunch. I fiddle on my phone some more. I send Lucy back a laughing emoji and let Alison know that Mom liked the picture from last night. Second in line. Just one octogenarian in between me and lunch. I look down at my phone to see it's 12:50 when the octogenarian is replaced by a guy whose suit looks like it cost more than my car talking on his bluetooth.

"Excuse me." I tap him on the shoulder and am ignored. "Hey, lines back there man."

The guy turns, he can't be older than Sasha, "First, I'm on the phone. Second, you weren't paying attention, so this is my spot now."

I feel the blood rush to my face. I haven't been talked to like that since high school. "Are you serious right now? I've been in line like an hour, wait your turn."

"Look asshole," he steps forward, puffing his chest out towards me, "I'm on an important call. Unlike some people, I don't have time to wait an hour for a hot dog."

"Next!" is the call from the counter, and this guy spins and

starts ordering. For a second, I tell myself I'm going to step forward and order in front of him. I even rehearse what I'm going to say to the cashier when I get there. Instead, I bitch about him to my 142 followers on Twitter and I stand and wait for him to order. I'm already late back I figure, what's a few more minutes?

As I walk in at 1:20, Sasha stops me: "Go to Wendy's office now."

I figured Wendy would probably be pissed, but the look on Sasha's face worries me. I hurry to my desk and drop off the food and unbundle myself. I head up one floor to Wendy's office in the executive's suite. Wendy's office is all glass with a glass door. I know she sees me coming. I still knock anyway when I get there. Wendy is quite possibly both the most professional and the most fashionable person I've ever met in my life. At 55 she could easily pass for 40, and I as far as I know has always looked that way. She waives me in.

"Sit down Matt. Just got a call from Mr. Mulvahill."

"Trust fund boy's lawyer?"

"Yes, Mr. Hagen's lawyer. Sorry Matt, they're going in another direction."

I sink a bit in the chair, "Well shit, that didn't take long." Normally a client would wait at least a week before making a decision like this, "did they say why?"

"No, but I can tell you way." Wendy shifts forward in her chair. I see that, in addition to a copy of my most recent pitch proposal, that she has a copy of my last two pitches on her desk.

"I looked over your proposal. Why did you think that Evan Hagen, a 25 year old with over \$7 million in capital would want to invest in low-risk index funds?"

"Well, I figured he's set for life and wouldn't want to

change that,” I say sheepishly, waiting for Wendy’s hammer to fall.

“Matt, if he wanted to just make sure he didn’t run out of money he would’ve hired H & R fucking Block. Guys like Evan Hagen come to us for something big. Something interesting. They have money, they want more money and they want it now. And, if something goes wrong and if this money runs out, guys like Evan Hagen can get more from Dad. They don’t want to play it safe. They want to blow it on some start-up that’s going to revolutionize some bull shit or another--not collect half a percent for the next fucking decade.”

Wendy takes off her glasses and rubs between her eyes before looking up at me to say, more in a tone of pity than anger, “honestly Matt, why can’t you see that?”

The color drains from my face and I feel my stomach drop into the soles of my shoes.

“I just...I just figured I’d pitch what I would do if I were in their position.”

Wendy sighs, again more with pity than annoyance, “Matt, they’re not you. They’ll never be you. They’d never consider a world where they are like you. You can’t keep making pitches like these.”

Wendy motions to the evidence of my last three failures.

“It’s not like all of these pitches are the same Wendy, I tailored these to each client.”

“Honestly Matt, there is more variety in your color choices on these pitches than in their contents. Hendrickson - index funds with low yield bonds. Pulaski - index funds with low yield safe bonds. Hagen - index funds with low yield safe bonds. Yeah, they’re different amounts in the two pots each time, but they’re the same fucking pots.”

I feel the blood that had drained from face rushing back to

my cheeks to the point that I break into a bit of a sweat from the heat.

“I’m...I’m sorry Wendy. I guess I just need to change my strategy. I’ll adjust my pitch for clients in the future.”

All I want to do is leave. Everything in my body is pulling me to leave. Unfortunately Wendy won’t let me leave.

“I don’t know how many more clients you’re going to get Matt,” Wendy’s voice broke a bit when she said that. Like how my Mom’s voice broke when she told me my dog had cancer when I was 10.

“Everyone likes you. I like you. I’ve stood up for you. The problem is, I’m not the only executive here. The other board members don’t know anything about you. They’ve never met your wife. They’ve never had Hannah sit at their desk and pretend to be boss. All they see is one accountant on a roster of a dozen accountants, and that one accountant hasn’t brought in a new client in a year.”

I don’t think I want the answer, but I ask the question anyway.

“Are you firing me Wendy?”

Wendy pauses. At least I think she does. It’s hard to really gauge how much time passes in a moment like this.

Wendy slides her glasses back on cooley and collects herself, “No. Not yet anyway. But if you put up another pitch like one of these, then I’ll be out of arguments to the board. Got it?”

I manage to croak out a “got it” and get up to leave.

“And Matt,” I freeze, “if you ever keep me waiting like this again, you won’t make it to the board.”

The walk back to my desk seems twice as long as normal. I walk by reception without stopping. Sasha wouldn’t ask what happened, but I’m an open book. She’d be able to tell

immediately and I don't want pity from someone 10 years younger than me and nearly at the same place professionally.

The smell of grease greets me at my desk. I go to the break room and drop the dogs in the trash there so I don't have to smell it at my desk. Suddenly I don't have an appetite.

Honestly, I don't remember what the rest of the day was like. I had another message from Lucy but didn't respond. I'd fill her in later, but I don't want to go over it all again right now. All I know is that at 5:00 pm I had no emails and there wasn't any new work on my desk.

As I bundle myself up to go out in the cold again I can't help but think, "Time to see how I'm fucked tonight." I don't know how I'm going to tell Alison about today. *If* I tell Alison about today. Maybe it's best just to sit on it. After all my next pitch might be a winner. No need to worry her I guess.

Before heading to my car I stop at the newsstand in the lobby and buy a Diet Coke. My throats been dry since meeting with Wendy. As an impulse buy I grab one of the little bouquets of flowers the clerk keeps by the register. Whatever I decide to tell Alison, I suppose having flowers with me couldn't hurt.

chapter two

L.P. Masters

I STILL WOKE UP early, even though I'd been sure that the alarm was turned off. Damn biological clock. I lay in bed a few minutes, trying to pretend I could actually fall back asleep. Almost half an hour later I sighed and rolled over. It was a quick movement, so sudden I almost could have missed it. Alison's eyes had been open, but as she came into view, her eyelids dropped shut. Her face remained impassive, and she breathed gently. Pretending to be still asleep.

I stared at her to remind myself what it was I had fallen in love with all those years ago. She was still in good shape. She didn't let an office job get the better of her physique. A strand of her blonde hair had fallen across her brow and I swept it back behind her ear. She didn't flinch, didn't even change the rate of her breathing. I pulled myself up on my elbow and kissed her on the cheek. Still no response, still this pretence of being asleep.

I began to move down, kissing her on the neck the way I knew used to always turn her on.

She turned over and brushed her hand over her neck,

pushing my lips away from her skin. "I'm still sleeping," she said drowsily.

I bit at my bottom lip. I could hear the lie in her forced sleepy voice. She was awake, just like me. Office work apparently does that to a brain, even if we don't want it to. I slid across the bed and laid my head on her pillow, my elbow resting on my own hip and my hand barely touching her flank. I felt as if I couldn't touch her.

There we stayed for another twenty minutes until her breathing changed enough that I knew she couldn't pretend any longer.

"Good morning, Alison," I said quietly.

"Good morning," she gave me begrudgingly.

"Happy anniversary."

At least she turned her head enough to kiss me. I went in for another kiss, a deeper kiss. She returned the gesture like it was her duty, but it was our anniversary. I'd take duty. I ran my fingers down her arm and smiled at her. She took a long, patient breath.

"Do you remember what happened ten years ago?" I asked.

"Yeah," she said, and though her expression didn't move I could hear in her voice that she wanted to roll her eyes. I could feel that frustration rising again but I tamped it down.

"Well?" I asked and raised my eyebrows.

She sighed and rolled away from me.

"What?" I asked.

"Hannah will be up soon."

I shrugged. "So let her be up. Our door's locked." I reached out and touched her hip again and she shoved my hand away.

"Not this morning, Matt. We've got to get ready for the

party.”

She climbed out of bed. She went to the bathroom to get dressed.

I went down to the kitchen after a hot shower and a shave. Alison was just putting a plate of steaming eggs on the table. When Hannah saw me she jumped over to me with the excitement that only a seven-year-old girl can have. “Daddy! The party’s tonight! Are you sure you invited Shiloh’s mum and step dad?”

I smiled down at her. “Yes, Hannah. Shiloh’s parents have been invited. They said they’re planning to be here.”

“Yea! Yea! Yea! Shiloh’s coming tonight!” She hopped up and down. I wrapped her in my arms and gave her a hug, more to stop the energetic movement.

“What did you make me for breakfast this morning? It smells amazing?”

“Scrambled sunshine, Red-only rainbows, and shredded rainclouds.”

“Yum!” I said. “My favorites.”

Hannah giggled. I sat down and poured myself a cup of coffee.

“Oh yeah,” she said, all excitement disappearing from her voice. “I also made you hot unicorn poo.”

I took a deep breath of my coffee then a noisy sip. “Mmmm! You make the best hot unicorn poo in the world!”

“Ugh! Gross.”

Alison set the plate of hash browns on the table, but there was no smile on her face at our daughter’s silliness. I buried my face in the coffee cup to hide the disappointment. It seemed like nothing could make her smile these days.

“Well, are we ready for breakfast?” I grabbed a spoonful of

eggs and was about to put it on my plate.

Hannah yelled, “Stop, daddy!”

She climbed up on the chair next to me, dished up two small servings of hash browns like clouds. She arranged my red rainbow bacon strips to cross the plate, then gave me a little “sun” of eggs up in the corner.

“There. Now you can eat,” she said, as she worked on decorating Alison’s plate. I looked across the table at her and flashed a smile. She blinked at me and hid her own face behind the coffee cup.

I took a deep breath. “So what do we need to do before the party?”

“A lot,” Alison said. “There’s a list on the fridge. I think I should go shopping first thing. You can fix that patio swing in the back. You know the one I’ve been asking you to fix for weeks now.”

I caught her jab and clenched down on my teeth so I wouldn’t say something rude back. It was our anniversary. I was determined to have something nice. I nodded. “Sounds good. I’ll get to it right after breakfast.”

“Hannah, are you going shopping with me?”

“No, mum. I want to stay with dad.”

Alison didn’t respond. Just picked up her red-only rainbow and tore it in half with her teeth. I drank a little more unicorn poo.

I tightened the last screw and looked over at Hannah. “Now we get to find out if daddy did this right. You ready to try it out?”

“Yeah!” Hannah yelled.

“Are you sure? Because if I did it wrong and this swing breaks again, you could end up falling all the way to My Little

Pony Land.”

Her eyes widened. “Well now I hope you did it wrong!”

I laughed and picked her up, setting her down gently on the swing. I looked around dramatically, then swung her with pretend caution. “Well,” I said. “No wormholes opening up to take you to another dimension. I must have done something right.”

“Oh, darn!” Hannah folded her arms over her chest and made a pouty face. I sat down next to her and started us swinging. It was nice and warm in the little sun room we had, and even though the clouds kept covering up the sun, it was usually pretty bright in there.

“Dad, does mum still love you?”

I’d been wondering that myself lately, but it wasn’t for a little girl to worry about. “I’m sure she does. Mum and I just have a few things we have to work out.”

“Cause Shiloh’s mum didn’t love her dad anymore. Now they don’t live together.”

“She’s got her step dad.”

“Yeah,” she said with a sigh. “Blair’s weird. Shiloh wants her daddy back.” She thought a moment as we swung back and fourth, then her eyes lit up. “I know! What if Shiloh’s dad came and lived with her mum and Blair? Then they could all raise Shiloh.”

I almost choked on my own air. I coughed a few seconds and shook my head. “I don’t know, Hannah. People don’t usually do that.”

She shook her head. “Parents are weird. You and mum aren’t going to live in different houses, are you?”

I didn’t answer. I couldn’t. I didn’t want that to happen for Hannah’s sake, but sometimes there were things beyond our control.

“Daddy?” Hannah pressed.

“We’ll try not to, babe. We’ll really try.”

Hannah frowned but nodded her head. “Okay.” She hopped down off the swing. “Can I watch a show?”

“Sure.”

She ran off. She knew how to turn the TV on by herself now. How was I going to deal with a little girl who was growing up way too fast? I pushed myself one more time on the swing and was about to get up when I heard Alison’s voice. “Did you get it fixed?”

I looked up at her. “I’m sitting on it, aren’t I?”

“Yes.” She eyed me a moment then said, “That’s a very good test of its strength.”

I chuckled then patted the seat next to me that Hannah had just vacated. “There’s room for two. We could really test out its strength.”

She hesitated a moment as if trying to decide if she wanted to join me, then she sat down.. It was nice to have her beside me. I put my hand on her thigh.

“You know, Hannah’s watching a show,” I said.

“I saw.”

“So we got half an hour at least,” I said, moving my hand a little higher up her thigh.

“Not right now,” she said.

“Why not? Right now is perfect.” I kissed her on the cheek.

“We have to get ready for the party.”

I sighed. “A party to celebrate our anniversary. We can take a couple minutes out of the day.”

Alison stood up. “I have to get the little smokies started.”

“I’ve got some little smokies I could start for you.” I winked at her.

Alison cleared her throat. “Why don’t you start setting up the chairs?”

“You want a chair dance?”

“Oh, come on, Matt.”

“Come on, what, Alison? You seem to forget what we’re celebrating here.”

She didn’t say anything. She just walked off. I stared after her and worried about the promise I’d made to Hannah.

“Well, congratulations Matt, Alison. Ten years already! That’s quite the feat.”

I shook John’s hand and smiled at him. “Thanks.”

“How’s the restaurant?” Alison asked.

“Oh you know,” John said. “Hot as usual.”

Alison smiled. “Hot’s good in January, right?”

“I suppose so. Except that I sweat in the kitchen then step outside and turn into an ice pop.” John looked around the room at all our guests and asked, “How’s the accounting? You’re getting busy, right? Tax season and all that.”

“Oh...” Alison said, knowing what my response would be.

I let my eyes roll back in my head and pretended he’d just hit me with a knockout blow as my knees sagged slightly. “Please don’t say the T word in my home, John.”

He laughed, his big, gutty laugh that he’d had since we went to school together. A moment later Lucy was in our group, standing to my left. “Ah. John. Now I found you.”

“However did you do that?”

“Matt told a joke.” She looked at me. “What was it?”

I shook my head. “It wasn’t a joke. I actually mean it. That word is worse than the F bomb.”

“Is that the F bomb I’m thinking of?” John asked.

“Yes. Finances.”

Lucy giggled and pushed my arm. “You’re such a nerd,” she said, then leaned in close and whispered in my ear, “For an accountant, you have some pretty weird forbidden words, Matt.”

I smiled at Lucy. She was being a bit of a flirt tonight. This wasn’t the only time this evening she’d done something like that. I didn’t think anything of it. She’d always been a flirt. Ever since we were kids.

John interrupted my thoughts. He shook his head and stated, “That wasn’t the F bomb I was thinking of.”

“Oh, yeah. You can say that word as much as you want. I mean—no one around here is getting any of that, so no real taboo to talk about it.”

It came out before I could stop it and I knew as soon as the words left my mouth I was in trouble. I looked toward Alison who was pushing a strand of hair behind her ear. It seemed like a natural thing, but I knew it was her way of getting ready to land a punch.

And then she did. “Some people around here are getting it,” she said, and her eyes burned into Lucy.

The insinuation took me by surprise, and I couldn’t hold it in any longer. “What? You think Lucy and I are—”

Alison cut me off, “Oh, don’t even deny it, Matt. She’s been in love with you since you were fourteen.”

I looked at Lucy to see what her response would be. She had her head down like she didn’t want to be part of this conversation any longer. I turned back and sneered at Alison, angry that she would cause such hurt to someone who was only my friend, who had been my friend for so long. “I’m not cheating on you, Alison.”

“Oh, sure. You just like hanging out with this slut cause she’s got such a great personality.”

“Alison! What the hell is wrong with you?”

“What the hell is wrong with me? Maybe I don’t like sharing my husband with his childhood sweetheart.”

All the frustration of the morning, all the pent up anger and sexual tension came out in a burst that I shouldn’t have let happen and Alison didn’t deserve. “You don’t share anything with your husband. I’ve never slept with Lucy. You might have realised that. Maybe if I had slept with her, she would at least satisfy me. When all I get from you is—”

“Daddy?”

My heart stopped. My vision tunneled until all I could see was Hannah standing there, pushing her way between John and Lucy. She looked up at me with her big blue eyes that showed her aching soul.

“Hannah, I...”

She shook her head. “Never mind.” She turned around. “Come on, Shiloh.”

They left.

I took a deep breath and exhaled slowly.

Lucy looked at Alison and said, “I’m sorry. There really is nothing going on between us. I’m just a bad flirt, Alison. I’m sorry.”

Alison swallowed hard. “I’m sorry too, Lucy. It’s just been a stressful week.”

Lucy nodded. She turned to me and said, “Congratulations, Matt.” Then she walked away.

Alison looked at me, her lips a straight line. She looked like she was about to cry. She turned and left without a word to me.

I scanned the room for Hannah and found her across the room, sitting on the chair by Shiloh. They held hands together and Shiloh was talking quietly with her head leaned in against

Hannah's.

Yeah. Happy anniversary to me.

chapter three

E. Kinna

OH, HOW I HATE it when my plans go awry. Earlier that night I'd received a message from Alison claiming she was stuck in a client meeting and would be late getting home. I had hoped she wouldn't be too late, but by eight-thirty I'd given up. Mom and Dad had picked up Hannah from school for a weekend sleepover, and I had made reservations at our favourite restaurant. I'd planned the perfect evening, and in return I'd been rejected. It hurt.

Hungry, I opened the fridge to see last night's leftover stir-fry. Blech. No thanks. Time to hit the pub.

The temperature was well below freezing and it was snowing pretty hard, which was normal for Chicago in February, but I decided to leave the car at home and walk. That way, I could have as many beers as I wanted.

Putting on my parka I had to suck in my gut to get the zipper to close. That tempted me to forego a calorie laden meal, in favour of huffing and puffing my way to my old physique on Alison's treadmill. But I did need food and I would be walking to the pub and back. Surely that counted.

Jimmy O'Leary's was a few blocks away and one of those cozy neighbourhood places monopolized by young professionals on the rise. I'd been like them a few years ago, teetering on the precipice of carefree drunkenness before plunging into the mire of middle-aged moderation. Early 90's grunge music blared over the din of laughter and clinking dishes, and my stomach growled at the smell of charbroiled goodness wafting from the kitchen. None of the tables were vacant, so I slid onto a stool at the end of the bar.

I ordered a pint of pale ale and Jimmy's famous bacon cheeseburger with poutine, despite, or maybe because of, Alison once saying that anything covered with gooey cheese and gravy was disgusting. Anyway, it was a nice change from my last dining out experience, where my inner rebel should have been ashamed of himself.

"I don't like this restaurant." Hannah pouted, pushed the menu away and grabbed her Barbie doll.

"They have very good food here," I said. "I can't wait to try the steak sandwich."

Alison said, "I'm sure they'll make you a grilled cheese and cut off the crusts."

I nudged Hannah and pointed to a table across the room. "If you eat all your dinner, you and I can share one of those chocolate, strawberry sundaes. We'll get them to put two cherries on top."

Hannah smiled. "Ooh, yummy."

"Really, Matt?" Alison looked at the roll of fat above my belt.

"What? I'm starving. I didn't have lunch."

"So that's your excuse to overdose on carbs tonight?"

"Fine," I said and flipped the menu to peruse the healthier offerings as Hannah squeezed my hand.

"Daddy," she said, leaning to rest her head on my stomach, "I like your tummy. It's like a big pillow."

The bartender brought me another beer. I looked down at my plate, now empty except for a few specks of cheese curd and gravy smears. Then, I looked down at my waist. Yikes, it had grown quite a lot the past couple of years. Maybe I should have used the treadmill instead of scarfing back a burger and poutine.

Someone hiccupped next to me. It was a slim woman about my age wearing a black track suit with mussed auburn hair tied in a pony tail. She sat hunched over an empty highball glass and clenched a tissue. Her eyes and face were puffy, but she was still pretty. She looked at me but didn't smile.

"Howdy," she said.

I nodded. "Howdy."

She waved the bartender over. "I need another drink."

I wanted to ignore her, but also didn't want to come across like an insensitive ass. So, I said, "You okay?"

"No. No, I'm not." She choked back a sob. "My husband...he...he left me. He...he's fallen in love with someone else."

Oh Christ, I thought, why did people have to blurt their personal problems out like that? Now I had to pretend that I gave a crap about this stranger. I wondered how long before I could leave without looking like a jerk.

"Uh, wow. That...sucks." I said, grabbing my wallet from my pocket and sliding my credit card towards the bartender, impatient to pay my bill so I'd have the freedom to escape at a moment's notice.

I guess the crying woman didn't notice or care that her revelation made me uncomfortable, because she kept talking.

"You know the worst part? I knew he was having an affair. I *knew it*." As her voice got louder, her face turned redder. "For fifteen years I was the perfect wife. I gave up my job, had

two kids, I gave up carbs, and I even got Botox. Lemme tell ya, those needles bloody hurt.” She sniffled and grabbed another tissue from her purse. “Oh, but then, all of sudden he’s working late every night...and then he starts working out, starts wearing fancy Italian suits. Why? He’s a bloody dentist! Does your dentist wear three thousand dollars’ worth of Armani when he drills into your teeth?”

“No, he doesn’t.” I had been wondering how Italian suits proved that someone had cheated on their wife, but I had to admit she had a point.

“Oh, but it wasn’t just that, you know? He became so *different*. Like he wasn’t even the same person, like I was living with a stranger.”

Somewhere in the twisted corridors of my mind her last statement ignited an unwelcome spark, one I knew had been hiding there these many months. I’d smothered it because I was afraid of what it would awaken, but in that moment all my willpower drained into a quivering pool of doubt.

“No. I uh...no, I don’t know.” I replied, even as all the idiosyncrasies of the past few months with Alison exploded in the forefront of my mind.

“Did he think I was stupid? That I wouldn’t notice how he changed?” The woman blew her nose.

I remembered laundry day and putting Alison’s underwear away only to find her lingerie fresh and clean and folded, instead of shoved in the back of the drawer like it had been for so long.

“Did he think I wouldn’t notice he’s never home for dinner? How he’s never there anymore to help the boys with their homework?”

I remembered how Alison used to worry she’d lose her job because she left earlier than her colleagues, so she could spend

more time with me and Hannah. Now, there were days she worked later than anyone else.

“We used to talk, you know?” She turned her tear-stained face towards me. “We were partners, friends. But lately, it’s like I don’t even exist.”

I remembered Alison and I staying up late watching old movies, talking and laughing, sharing the small details of our day, and marvelling at Hannah growing up. Now, too often I would be in one room and Alison in another, or if we were together there was silence between us.

“Oh God.” The woman’s rant became a whisper. “How could he do this to me, to us? Why? What did I do wrong?” She started sobbing again.

The bartender gave her another drink at the same time he returned my card with the receipt for me to sign. My chest constricted. I couldn’t breathe. I felt like I was going to be sick.

“I’m sorry,” I said, not meeting the woman’s eyes “but I have to go.” I had to get home.

I was walking fast, but it felt like home was miles away. All I could hear was the sound of my footsteps crunching on the sidewalk salt, and all I could see was the frozen puffs of my laboured breath curling around the hood of my parka as I hurried along. I rummaged for my phone in my pocket, but it wasn’t there. Damn, I’d left it at home. All I wanted was to call Lucy. I wanted to hear her soft voice telling me that I’m crazy and everything will be okay. I wanted to hear her tell me that Alison can’t be having an affair, that I was imagining things. And yet, I knew it was the only thing that made sense.

The house was still dark when I arrived; Alison wasn’t home yet. Inside, I stood in the hallway trying to decide what to do. Should I call Lucy? No, I needed to look for proof first.

Logic took over as I walked into our home office and

clicked on the light. Because I took care of the finances, I knew that there was nothing unusual in our banking statements. No unexplained purchases, no restaurant charges, no clear evidence of an affair. I turned on the computer to check Alison's emails, dreading that I'd find a lover's secret message. But there was nothing.

I started to relax. The beer buzz was wearing off, and the comfort of home made it easier to feel distanced from the rantings of the woman at the bar. Life felt normal again, and then, I remembered Alison's old smartphone. She'd given it to Hannah to play with, but maybe it still had Alison's account information.

I found it on Hannah's night table, and the screen turned on when I picked it up. I sat on my daughter's small bed while I snooped through her mother's emails.

There were dozens of notification messages from Facebook and Twitter, and several sales offers from her favourite stores. Her inbox was full of all the usual stuff——no emails from secret lovers.

Next, I clicked on the text messenger app, and there it was in glowing green and white——the proof.

Alison: *Hi, I'm still at work, but almost finished.*

Unknown: *I want you here, now. When can you be here?*

Alison: *Soon, I promise.*

Unknown: *What are you wearing?*

Alison: *Cheeky bastard!*

Unknown: *Haha, yes, I am and you love it.*

Alison: *Maybe.*

Unknown: *Yes, you do. You also know what I'm going to do to you tonight.*

Alison: *Do I?*

Unknown: *Yes, you're mine. Always and forever mine.*

Alison: *I know.*

Alison: *Okay, I'm leaving now. Will be there soon.*

xoxoxo

Unknown: *I'll be waiting...*

I couldn't read anymore. It felt like someone had punched me hard in the centre of my gut, and it made me want channel the pain into slamming the phone on the floor and stomping on it, until nothing remained but little bits of metal and plastic. Instead, I smashed my fingertips on the screen to open up Alison's contact list. I needed to know his name, needed to know the name of the man I was going to kick the crap out of as soon as I knew where to find him, but his name and number were both recorded as UNKNOWN.

Oh no, screw that. There had to be a way to trace him, to learn his name and who he was, and I was going to find it.

The hum of the garage door opening told me that Alison was home. Damn, I wasn't ready to face her yet; the shock was too fresh. I took a series of deep breaths and slipped her phone into my pocket. I went into the living room and turned on the TV. I hoped the dim light would hide my fury and clenched fists as I watched Alison walk up the stairs and take off her coat.

"You're late," I said, careful to keep my voice neutral.

She startled and turned around. "Oh, I didn't think you'd still be awake."

"How was the meeting?"

"Um, it was fine. Long, but fine. Did you eat?"

"Indeed, I did. I went to Jimmy's pub."

"Alone?" She seemed surprised. "Well, as long as you had fun."

Fun? I thought. That wasn't quite how I'd describe it. "How about you?" I asked. "Did you eat?"

"Um, yeah. We just had some sandwiches delivered."

Each lie that came out of her mouth made my fists clench tighter.

"Listen," she said with an apologetic shrug, "that meeting left me exhausted, so I'm going to have a shower and then go to bed."

"Fine," I said, "you go ahead and do that."

chapter four

Conrad Gempf

YOU KNOW, I'M NOT really sure what I thought it would accomplish. I was thinking of a romantic dinner at Tony's; I tell her I've found out about her affair... And then... what? Did I expect her to repent: "I'm so sorry; how could I have done this to wonderful you? How could I think of leaving our ideal marriage?! Please forgive me."? Yeah, right.

But yeah, stupid romanticist me — maybe there was a bit of that hope. Or maybe the hope I'd get a clearer idea of what we'd broken in our relationship and an idea of how we'd fix it. I mean, surely that was Alison all over (I thought): mutual responsibility, talk it through, move on together.

And the idea of doing that over pasta at good ol' Tony's? Well, how could reminding ourselves of better times be a mistake? Not that it mattered. When I rang for a reservation, the recording told me. Closed. Six weeks. Will re-open under new management. Not an auspicious opening to the operation, but I persisted.

On the evening, I arrived at the Maharajah 15 minutes early, not wanting to risk ire by being late again, and hoping to

feel at home and natural when Alison arrived. They seated us in a booth, which was good atmospherically, but, well... I don't fit into close seating as comfortably as I did ten years ago. Ten years... wow. In my mind, I saw her all over again at that party in Marko's dormitory. "I'm Alison," she said simply, shaking her hair slightly. Oh, Alison...

"Good evening, sir; I'm Navim," said the waiter, handing me the giant tasseled folder they used for the menu, and beginning to gather up the glasses and cutlery from the other places.

"My wife will be joining me," I said, and he left a place set opposite with a second menu.

"Very good, sir. May I bring you anything while you're waiting?"

I had him bring water. Twenty minutes later, he suggested poppadum, I said no. Then five minutes after that, having looked at my watch four times, I called him back.

Between the two set places, without a word, he left a basket of the crispy fried bread/wafers, and the usual tray of sauces and pickles. I went to snap off a piece of poppadum, and the whole wafer jumped and shattered, a little piece in my hand, and fragments scattered here and there everywhere on the table. I ate my piece, and brushed the fragments with one hand into my other hand, and left them in the basket, just as she walked through the door.

I stood when she arrived at the table. "Sorry I'm late," she offered, leaning forward for an almost-hug and peck on the cheek. She smelled good, and her blonde hair brushed my cheek. How I wished at that moment for the impossible, movie moment, "You thought *that*!? Oh, I'm so sorry — he's actually my long-lost twin brother and we were hugging because we thought each other dead these last 30 years. I love

you, only you, Matthew Green, and I always will.”

I heard myself asking, “Is Hannah ok?” and instantly despised myself for what might be interpreted as a passive-aggressive criticism of her tardiness: do you have a good excuse like that for being late? At least I hadn’t looked at my watch before speaking.

“Tanya was a few minutes late, but agreed to stay after 10 if we need her,” she said, sitting down, arranging coat and bag on the seat next to her. “You ok?”

“Um, yeah,” I said, “Or actually, not really. Alison, I...”

“Good evening, Madam. I am Navim. Do you know what you’d like, or shall I give you a few more moments?”

I spoke, “Give us another few minutes, would you please, Navim. Thank you.”

He bowed slightly and moved off to another table to pour some tea.

Alison smiled slightly and raised one eyebrow, “Really? What’s up, Matt?”

“Let’s order first,” I said, studying my menu, though, of course, I’d decided what I wanted way before she’d arrived.

“Have you thought past your Prawn Puri?” she laughed softly. I’d often confessed that to be my favorite dish, although just a starter.

“I was thinking either the Jalfrezi or Chicken Tikka,” I said.

“Sounds perfect; why not get both and we’ll share them? You have your puri by yourself, though,” she smiled.

I couldn’t quite smile, but nodded to her and glanced over to Navim, still nodding.

He came, and I ordered the puri, the Lamb Jalfrezi, and chicken. Alison asked for the chili-spiced vegetables for her starter.

“Pilau rice for two?” Navim suggested and I agreed.

“And darjeeling tea?”

“Why not?” I said, closing the menu and handing it over.

Small talk during starters. Her work, my work, Hannah’s teacher. The prawn puri was excellent, but my stomach was already acidic before I’d started.

It felt like several centuries later of vapid conversation later, Navim brought the main dishes, and our plates, wiping them with a towel — “Careful. Very very hot.” — and spooned some rice onto them for us. I could delay it no longer.

“Alison. I *know*.”

She looked at me blankly, feigning ignorance.

“Your affair. I know.”

She dabbed her napkin against her lips before answering. “I see. I’m sorry — I’ve been wanting to tell you. It’s not been easy to find a time.”

“Who is it?” I asked “Another lawyer?”

“Matthew, I never wanted to hurt you.”

How do you react to that? You didn’t want to hurt me?, lady? Then don’t sleep around! What did you think this was going to do to me?

“Who is it?” I asked again, stupidly.

“We’ve been... It’s not been the same, you and I.”

Is that my fault? Is she blaming me? Is it something as simple and superficial as no longer fitting into the little bathing suit she’d bought me? I said nothing, stared dumbly, probably looking as perplexed and numb as I felt.

“Alison, wh...”

I was just about to ask “what can we do to fix this...” but suddenly, unbidden, I heard Lucy’s voice in my mind... from a conversation from 10 or 11 years ago, when my courting Alison didn’t seem to be working, “You are such a *man*,” I

remember Lucy laughing, “Your first impulse is always *how do I fix it* when a woman usually just wants you to stop and listen. We’re not talking about external situations we want changed, we’re talking about internal feelings we want to share.”

“Alison, wh... what happened? Why...?”

Alison looked thoughtful before answering... “I don’t know, Matt. We’re *not* the same, though, are we? Don’t you feel it too? Maybe since Hannah, I don’t know.”

“You haven’t been cheating on me since Hannah was born, have you?”

“No, no, no. This is only really been going on about a year. We’d flirted for a while, but it was only when you were in the hospital that...”

I exploded. “Hospital? I was only in the hospital because you...”

“I know,” she said, shaking her head slowly, “Maybe it was trying to take my mind off of the guilt, the whole roof thing was such a mistake...”

“So while I was in a hospital bed, you were...”

“Oh, that’s not *why*, Matt, it only made more convenient something that was going to happen anyway...”

“You make it sound like something that’s inevitable rather than something that you and I vowed in church 10 years ago would never happen. ‘Til death do us part,’ ‘forsaking all others,’ remember any of that?”

“Oh, Matt, don’t be so ...”

“Ok, this needs to stop. Tell me what you think is wrong with our relationship and we’ll work on it. We’ll look for a good counsellor and”

“Matthew, no, honey,” she said, “You need to look for a good lawyer not a good counsellor. I was thinking I’d use Jerry from the firm. Scott’s the best, but Jerry doesn’t know you.

You can ask Scott, but I do think it'd better to have someone who doesn't know us as a couple."

"What are you talking about? It's not 'too late' ... we can fix this ... we still love each other ... and there's Hannah. Who is that you've been seeing? You've still not told me."

"It doesn't matter who, Matt. What matters is that I think I want a divorce."

"Just tell me who he is," I said.

She put her fork down and looked at me with that irritating "I'm so funny" hint-of-a-smile she uses, "I don't believe I ever said it was a *he*..."

"Not a ...? What?" I watched her half-smile, "Is this a *joke* to you?! Are you actually *enjoying* this?"

"No, honey, I'm not. The Jalfrezi is even saltier than usual, and you know I never have tea with meals."

If there was more I didn't hear it. I didn't swear, I didn't hurl insults, I didn't say another word. I threw my napkin at the table and walked quickly to the exit, managing to put three 20s into the hand of Navim before crashing through the doors and out into the miserable February Chicago night.

chapter five

Mirela Vasconcelos

I PULLED THE DOOR shut in a quick burst behind me, not wanting to spend a moment more in Alison's proximity. I needed air, the cool crispness of winter on my face so I could think straight, I needed to get away from what had just been thrust upon me, I needed my life to go back to making sense before the sky fell around me and my world started ending.

Was there any chance this was a dream? I looked down at my white knuckles still gripping the doorknob. No. When you felt pain this intense in a dream, your body woke up as some sort of defense mechanism, but even though I was living a nightmare, I never before felt so solid, heavy, and stuck in my reality. I wouldn't wake up from this, if I was ever going to I would have as soon as the words left her mouth. My stomach churned at the mere thought and I forced myself to peel away from the door and move. It felt like an elephant were sitting on my chest and my legs wobbled beneath me as though my bones had been replaced with jello, but movement helped. I had no intended direction or destination, my legs just needed to keep it together enough to take me away from here. I barely

registered my surroundings, the few cars that drove along the street became blurs of color and noise. I thought about how the people within the vehicles were entirely oblivious to the insurmountable pain that was being experienced just beyond their reach. How lucky they were, to be living their normal lives, their worlds still intact, while mine crumbled.

I needed to think about something else, I needed distance not only from Alison but from the situation, from the reality that was coiling itself ever so tightly into a knot in the pit of my stomach and making me sick. The frigid air was no doubt biting to my exposed hands and neck, but I drank it in big gulps anyway, gasping for air as if I'd kept my head underwater just long enough to start feeling the panic and burning in my lungs. Temporarily at least, I was numb to the physical pain of a Chicago winter, it was no match for the cold I felt inside.

"Affair... Divorce." Her voice echoed clearly in my mind, the sharpness of her tone etched into my memory as I relived the moment again. Unable to help myself, I doubled over, resting my hand on the passenger side door of a grey Elantra parked along the curb of the sidewalk and took deep breaths, my free arm wrapped tightly around my abdomen. My mouth began to fill with saliva in the tell-tale sign I would soon dispel the contents of my stomach. I could sense the eyes of a passerby on me, but thankfully not many people took strolls during the winter and the stranger didn't stop to question if I was alright. No doubt they assumed an overweight man like myself was just having a difficult time with his exercise routine, no need to get involved. It was much too cold for the tears which burned in my eyes to fall, and it was doubtful anyone would question my red face in the bitter wind.

I lifted my head and saw the reflection on the car window of a young man walking away, his hands buried deep in the

pockets of his winter coat, head hunched down. Just as he was out of earshot, I retched. Each heave felt like my body was attempting to expel the memory itself from inside me. It worked for a short while in which all I could concentrate on were the contracting pulses in my diaphragm and the terrible burn in my throat. When it was done however, the sickly acidic taste in my mouth served only to remind me just how rotten things had become.

After a few moments of wallowing in self pity, I could no longer bare to continue looking at and smelling the pungent bile soaking into the pavement. The cold was also finally seeping into my bones. If I wasn't going to stay moving, I would need to be indoors. Using the help of the car to stand gingerly, I took in my surroundings with more attention, no longer wanting to close myself off entirely. There was an L station a few hundred feet down the street that could take me toward the Loop downtown. I made my way to it at a much slower pace than I'd previously been moving. Chicago was well known for this above ground train system that weaved its way through the city, but I hadn't ridden on it much since Hannah was born. We'd purchased a car then, for both safety and convenience.

God, how would Hannah handle this? She was barely old enough to even understand what the situation meant. Would she resent her mother for the affair, or me for letting them go? As I waited for the next train to take me downtown, a young family waited beside me. The parents seemed about my age, their daughter a bit younger than Hannah. I couldn't help overhearing their squabble, there were few people at the station and we were practically huddled together under the orange-ish glow of the heat lamps.

"What do you mean, you're not going to make it to her

recital? How many have you missed already since last year?” The woman’s voice was accusing and brittle as if she was close to a breaking point. I’d heard Alison sound similarly on numerous occasions. It started a year or two after Hannah was born. We’d begun to disagree on finances, Alison wanted to have an active lifestyle, to travel, and take more vacations as a family. I wanted to ensure we would be able to do those things once we secured ourselves for the future, but she wanted to live in the ‘now’. More often than not, we would argue about how I spent too much time in the office, and not enough with her and Hannah. Life must be cruel indeed to have shoved such an excruciating parallel in my face at that moment. “You have a *family*, Ron. Why don’t you act like it for a change?”

“Are ya kidding me, right now? As if I *don’t* act like it, working my ass off—”

“Watch your language!”

The man, Ron, I guess, threw his hands exasperatedly into the air after a brief glance to his daughter, then quickly crossed them tightly across his chest. “Working my *butt off*,” he continued through clenched teeth, “to feed and provide for this family. You’ll have to excuse me if I want to take some time for my self, which I *never* get the chance to do.”

“That’s the problem, Ron! You want to do things for your *self* and not *us*. It’s not just you anymore.”

The rumble of the approaching train muffled the rest of their conversation, and I welcomed the escape from this encounter, which could not have been a better personal torture technique than if satan had designed it himself. I made sure to sit in a different car than Ron’s family. The tightness in my chest had returned, and being seated felt comforting. I refused to look out the window at the city. For one, I was still feeling a little queasy and didn’t want to risk barfing again. But

more importantly, I'd made my life with Alison here. If one encounter with a random family was enough to floor me, I couldn't imagine how I'd feel if I looked out at the place that held all of our memories together. I had small respite in the knowledge that the closer we got to the Loop in the city center, the greater the likelihood I would find a place where memories of Alison wouldn't rush through me like water breaking through a dam. In fact, I was thinking of a particular place that would have a specific means of helping me clear my mind.

There was a bar not too far from the Loop I had been to with Lucy on a few occasions, I'd even taken John there for a few drinks one night, but never Alison. On the corner of a large building with pale bricks, its dark brown wood façade distinguished the bar from the other businesses on the block. It was the kind of place that wasn't too stuffy and would play good music but always felt a little too small.

"Whisky on the rocks, please," I paused. "Better make it a double."

The bartender nodded knowingly after glancing in my eyes. I wondered if he could see the distress behind them, but he didn't push any conversation, and I was grateful. He simply left to grab the bottle, poured my drink, placed it before me, and found some way to busy himself at the other end of the bar. I wasn't entirely certain this wasn't just typical bartender behavior, but I appreciated the space he gave me to cradle my whiskey and sit on the stool.

After a few steady gulps of Jack to wash down the lingering acidic taste from my mouth, I realised I hadn't progressed any farther than when I was leaning against the car in the street. Nothing made sense, and I had no idea how to handle this situation. What kind of man was I going to be in

this mess? It was all I could think about, but the only clarity I had was in the question, not the answer.

Ron and his family were still on my mind. I wasn't the only one going through difficulties with his wife, and that scene had made me think perhaps I had played more of a part in Alison's decision than I was making myself out to have. I could have done more to prevent it. Perhaps if I had been a better husband, father, man - one who hadn't let himself go, and sought solace in hot dogs far more often than I knew I should have. Alison had maintained her figure over the years, even after Hannah was born. She was as painfully beautiful now as when I first met her fourteen years ago. My mind instantly juxtaposed the image of Alison from when we were first dating to an image of her confirming the affair and letting me know she wanted a divorce. The psychological blow was brutal, and I might have gotten emotional again if I hadn't just been distracted by my phone buzzing in my pocket.

I grabbed at it feverishly, wondering if it was Alison, calling to apologize. To tell me she had made a mistake and she still loved me.

LUCY WHITFIELD - my phone flashed at me as it rang. Along with her name, an image of Lucy's smiling face covered the screen.

The disappointment was palpable, but there was also a certain amount of relief. It hadn't been too long since I'd last spoken to Lucy in late January, but she always knew how to help cheer me up, and work out difficult decisions - she'd been doing it for decades. Who better to discuss a mess like this than with my best friend? I was surprised I hadn't thought of it sooner. We saw and spoke with each other frequently enough that there was usually nothing new to report, and always called each other when big life events happened.

“Hey Luce.”

“What’s wrong?”

“That fast, huh?” It didn’t amaze me in the least she could tell I wasn’t feeling well from the tone in my voice. Then again, I wasn’t hiding it either. There weren’t very many walls between us.

“Look we can sit here and talk about how I can read you like a book all day, or you can just come out with it and tell me why your voice sounds like you’ve been crying. Matt, seriously, is everything ok?”

“In a minute, what did you call me for?” I needed her to talk for a minute about anything else while I composed myself enough to say what happened out loud in my own voice. I knew Lucy would understand, and give me the time I needed to prepare mentally. She wasn’t the type to push for information, if I hadn’t wanted to talk to her, I wouldn’t have answered the phone, and she would’ve understood that too. I’d never had an easier friendship with anyone. Lucy had grown up with me and not only watched but actively helped me figure out who I am, so there really couldn’t have been a better person to reach out to.

“Ok, well,” she sounded sheepish. “It wasn’t a big deal or anything, might be silly now, but I was just going to talk about how,” she took a breath and then her words came out all in a flurry like they always did whenever she was excited about something. “Did you know Lego Movie 2 came out!? I just found out about this, we should take Hannah ASAP!”

“Alison’s having an affair.”

Silence.

“And she wants a divorce.”

After another beat of silence, “What a bitch!”

“Hey, now!”

“Are you seriously ‘hey now’-ing me right now? That’s inexcusable, wretched, and unforgivable! You have a daughter! Has she thought about Hannah?” I knew Lucy stopped herself when she cut off. She could have continued railing on Alison for hours, using words that were far more colorful. But she knew I loved Alison and that the words she had chosen were a little too painfully true to hear. “I’m so sorry Matty, you deserve so much better. But she’s clearly not good for you, maybe this is for the best?”

I hung my head and circled my index finger around the rim of my glass before taking another large swig. “What would be best is if none of this had ever happened, and I was still blissfully married to my loving wife.”

“You don’t think *blissfully* is a little too strong?”

“The point is,” I noticed my voice had increased in volume beyond that of normal conversation and quickly lowered it again. “I just want to be with her. But I don’t know how to do that now that I know about this.”

“I don’t know how you would do that either, Matt... Please don’t be a cuckold, if she’s saying she wants to divorce you, why would you want to try and make it work with her? She’s already admitted she doesn’t want to put in the effort.”

I mumbled a smart-ass response, but Lucy didn’t catch it and asked me to repeat myself.

“I’m already a cuckold!” My head snapped up to check to see if anyone had overheard, but there was only one other man aside from the bartender in the bar and he was sitting across the room, unmoving. The bartender either didn’t hear or was playing coy.

“Come on, Matt, you know that’s not what I meant.”

Lucy had a quick tongue and a sharp wit, but she sometimes lacked delivery. It was only because I’d been her

friend for so long that I understood the message she was intending behind her words. “I know, you don’t want me to be a victim, Luce, I get it. You’ve said before how I need to know my worth.”

“You always get me.” We sat quietly on the phone for a bit, I imagined if we’d been together in person she might have had an arm around my shoulders, comforting me with gentle squeezes on the arm as she’d done many times before. It was her signature move. “You know, Matt, you *are* too good for her, and she isn’t worth any of your effort. You’re such a good father, you take wonderful care of Hannah. And you’re a good husband. She doesn’t see that, or doesn’t want to, apparently. You need someone in your life like me, Matty, who actually loves you and would spend the rest of her life with you and Hannah without ever questioning that.”

“I love you too, Lucy, thank you, but I’m not sure if I’m really either one of those things.”

“One of what things?”

“A good father and husband.”

“Oh, well, you are.” She paused again for a bit before continuing. “I guess... all I’m saying is that you should think about this with a clear head.”

“I know, and maybe you’re right. Maybe I can stop by? Are you home right now?”

“I’m in Osaka, Matty, remember? We’re going over final contracts so they can start construction.”

“Oh right,” my voice fell a few decibels, and hers rose to make up the difference. The extra cheeriness in her voice sounded a bit off, but I knew she was trying.

“You know, that shouldn’t stop you from coming! One of our senior designers is flying out from O’Hare tonight on the firm’s plane. I’m sure I could get you a seat. Why don’t you

come spend a few days with me- have you ever been to Japan?”

“No—”

“Well there you go, you don’t even need to stop at home. Just head to the airport now, and I’ll work out the details. What could be better for you? You can clear your mind, and not think about it at all, or if you want, we can talk about it in a space that’s totally neutral. It’s beautiful here this time of year.”

I considered it for a moment. Lucy could be right, I had just been complaining about how I needed a change of scenery from ones filled with memories of Alison. I hadn’t taken any vacation time in years, and it was a good time of year, there were still a few weeks before the spring rush began in earnest at work.

“I really do need you to make a decision though, because if you want to come, I need to make a phone call quick.”

“Ok.”

“Seriously?”

“Yes, I’ll go. I’m heading to the airport now. Text me the details of where to go as you get them.”

After a quick goodbye, I placed the phone back in my pocket. Something still felt wrong in the pit of my stomach, but now I had a good distraction to look forward to, so I tried not to focus on the sinking feeling inside me. I asked the bartender to call me a cab to O’Hare and finished the final gulp of whiskey in the glass, which I then placed back onto the bar atop a good tip. You can never put a price on someone who gives you space when you need it.

Before no time, I was sitting in a comfortable first class seat of a small Embraer business jet. I wasn’t entirely certain if where

I was sitting could be called first class, or if there were any class differentiation in a plane this size, but I was sitting near the front, and the chairs were spacious and comfortable. Alison would say, ‘you know you’re in first class when you can recline your seat all the way back, and your feet all the way up,’ and she was right, I thought, as I lay the seat completely flat.

Neither of the two flight attendants bothered me about raising my seat for take off either, which I took as a mental note to tell Alison to add to her ‘how you know you’re in first class’ list before I fell to reality and remembered what had happened. Our plane begun picking up speed. She was going to leave me. Who knows what would happen with Hannah. My life was falling apart and I was on a jet to Japan. What was I doing running away? I needed to face what was going on here and ‘now’, as Alison would say. Each time I thought more about Alison, the less powerful the sting became and the easier it was to remember that I had a part to play in our marriage falling apart. After all, here I was, taking my first vacation in years, alone. The wheels of the airplane lifted off the ground and we slowly climbed to the sky.

Lucy had been right. ‘Blissful’ was the wrong word to describe my marriage with Alison. But that wasn’t only Alison’s fault, she’d done wrong, but I could have done better. Throughout the years I had had my own share of extramarital interactions, though I wouldn’t call them affairs. An affair is what you have with a lover, no, what I did with those women, I paid for. It was nothing but a business transaction between consenting adults. Having an affair was an entirely different thing, requiring entirely different emotions. And, I never wanted to divorce Alison. Hannah needed both of her parents, she deserved a loving family, not a broken one.

I still wasn’t sure how I was going to get past what Alison

had done, but I suddenly knew that deep down, I wanted to work to fix it. I wanted to be able to get to the point where we had moved on from this, because it would mean she would still be my wife. I never married her with the intention of ending our marriage, and I wouldn't allow this to end it now. I would use what happened as a way to fuel me into being a better husband and father. I suddenly believed I could live up to the image Lucy had in her mind about the kind of man I was, and all this time, I just hadn't realised how far I had strayed from being that person.

If I hadn't been blind to the damage I was causing my relationship with Alison by focusing more on my work than anything else, I may have been more attentive to her needs as a woman and she wouldn't have strayed. I thought back to Ron and overhearing him bicker with his wife. I wondered if he would realise how much she meant to him only after finding out she wanted a divorce. If Ron sucked it up and truly supported his family, by attending dance recitals or taking them on vacations, would he repair the relationship with his wife and be happy? I wondered if there was any way Alison and I might still be happy.

My eyes had started watering and tears were freely falling into my ears. I wiped them from my eyes and realised the depth of my mistake in getting on this plane. I would be over six thousand miles away in seventeen hours and would then need to wait another seventeen hours before I could get home, if there was even a flight available. I couldn't wait that long to speak to Alison. To have a real conversation, face-to-face and tell her I wanted to work through this. It needed to happen now, or she might run into *his* arms for comfort. My lip raised at the thought.

No, I needed to be here, I needed Chicago with Alison's

memories, and I needed to make this better. I was no longer going to run away! All these years, I hadn't been facing the truth. Running away was exactly how our marriage got to the point it had. I would often avoid and deflect our disagreements with work obligations and excuses. But starting now, that was no longer the man I was going to be.

I sat up quickly from the seat and stood all in one fluid motion. I had planned on speaking with a flight attendant to ask if I could please be let off of the plane, but as soon as I stood, I felt a sharp pain in my chest, like a strong punch from a clenched fist. It winded me and the room started spinning. I held on to the seat to steady myself. I felt my body break out into cold sweat as the nausea from earlier in the day returned in full force. It wasn't until my left arm started to feel a tightness that I realised what was going on.

My eyes widened in surprise and I made the effort to turn toward the end of the plane to face the flight attendant who was walking briskly toward me. Her frown told me she thought I was being disruptive to the flight, but as I turned more fully toward her, I watched her face morph from annoyance to abject concern. As it was morphing, my angle on it changed from top view to bottom, and it wasn't until I hit the floor that I realised everything was going black.

chapter six

Ioa Petra'ka

FEBRUARY 1995

Something didn't smell right.

I opened my mouth and a stream of tasteless, odourless foam with the consistency of coagulated milk pumped through my throat, streamed urgently around tooth and tongue, down chin and chest to splatter thick between my bare feet. I found myself not horrified, but marvelling at the quantity of granular black and red matter accumulating on the floor. Giddy with rare pleasure, a wholly unexpected sense that if one continues for much longer, they will decant their entire body to the floor. I squeezed my eyes shut, trying to dampen the laughter that was bubbling around my fear, burning my torso.

My eyes snapped open to a formless sheet of white light. I found myself reflexively taking stock of my mouth with my tongue, it whispered like dry leaves over my lips.

Something didn't feel right. A gap, tender gum with the hint of something hard beneath, persistent and patiently

growing up out of the jaw.

“Endotracheal tube removed, respiratory response normal.”

Another voice responded from the right, “Hello there dear, can you hear me? Blink twice if you cannot speak.”

Dust and breath scraped out of my throat, ending in a weak cough that kept ticking, beat after beat until it merged with my ongoing attempts to restrain the laughter. I felt a hand wrap itself gently around my elbow, but even as I wondered at how long their fingers were, the convulsions gradually subsided, replaced by a jarring but powerful sense of comfort, and nostalgia.

“That’s good enough,” the voice was accompanied by a gentle squeeze of my too thin arm. There was a pause and someone moved across the room. As I stared into the impermeable whiteness before my eyes, I realised it was gradually fading into form and colour, emerging from the room like one of those old instant photographs, flapping it against the leg, beating an image out of the fog.

“Have a sip of this”, the nurse let go of my arm and reached for something beside the table. I tried to take hold of what he was offering, but everything moved the wrong way, too quickly, and before I could figure out how to open my fist the mug was before me.

I sucked the warm broth through the straw, felt a twitch as it flooded around that oddly missing tooth in the back. Before I knew it, and nearly oblivious to the pain of swallowing, I was gulping and coughing, trying to drink every drop, but no matter how I sloshed and swallowed it felt as though everything was still dry.

“Can you tell me your name?” the kindly voice asked around the deafening sound of a straw vacuuming the final

drops from the mug. I looked up, now able to see the ghostly impression of a face pressing through the ever thinning gauze around me. A halo of unfashionably out of style hair cradled his face, reminding me of thickly hairsprayed local news personalities from my childhood.

“Matth...” I started and abruptly stopped. My throat was raw, every muscle felt like it was bleeding, but instead of the usual subterranean rumble I would have expected my tortured voice box to sound like, my voice came out clear, melodic, unnatural—but somehow despite all of that, strangely familiar. I tried again, trying to find any speaking register other than falsetto, until in desperation I shouted, “Matthew Green”. Something popped in my throat on “Green”, sending my voice into an even shriller octave. “I think I swallowed some helium,” I giggled.

The nurse cocked his head, shifting the way the light fell through his hair, “Why do you say that?”

“Uhm, isn’t it obvious?” I squeaked, and erupted into another fit of mirth.

“Does my voice sound ordinary to you?” the nurse asked.

“I guess so?” I tentatively reached up to touch my throat, so flat it felt. And the attendant must have shaved me ridiculously close.

The nurse glanced over the bed, and after a moment I turned to share his point of gaze; to look into an area of the room yet still shrouded in white gauze. If shadows could be white, came a terrifying thought. I became gradually aware of the scratching of graphite over paper, loops and slopes, coming from within this milky shadow. It seemed like something from a film I’d seen years ago. A doe disappearing into the sedge, something like a twilight and an ancient mythology. I stared fiercely into the blur, but could discern not

one detail from it.

I shook my head and everything inside of me sloshed. I hadn't even noticed before, hadn't been able to see, but I was rails thin beneath the white linen I was swaddled in. How long had I been here?

"What is your date of birth?"

"What happened to me, where is Hannah?"

"Something bad happened while you were walking down the road, do you remember?"

"The last thing I remember was driving to the school to pick—" the words got all tangled with panic, "—where is Hannah!"

The room felt more silent than it had been a moment ago, even though the scratching of the pencil had not waned. I turned back and forth between the halo of hair and the milky splotch.

In that moment I wasn't sure what frightened me most, that my girl might be hurt (or worse!) or that the emotions I should have felt could be best described as incomplete, or maybe it was that they were anchored to older memories, some I had thought forgotten? I became aware of a warm hand on my shoulder, so frail and small was I beneath it, and wondered why it was there.

It was the whiteness, it was coming back. I felt cold. Colder than a lake effect blizzard in the darkest winters. I was shivering violently, and even that felt *wrong*. My elbows were rattling against my hipbones, when was the last time I could feel those? I looked down at my arms, they were so short.

"What is happening?" I came to myself screeching over and over. The louder I got, the more disjointed my voice sounded inside my own head. The nurse reached above my head and fiddled with something. And like a hot late summer

air, and the next thing I knew was a strange taste of strawberries in the back of my throat, and the realisation that I was suddenly quite high. I sunk back into my pillow. Calm, almost just.

I came awake from a feverish sequence of noticed things going on around me, events jumbled out of order, oftentimes dubiously mixed in with dreams. Things were being said around me, but they didn't seem to matter. I felt my foot being stretched at one point. Clipboards clicking. Where were all of their computer screens and tablets?

As some medically induced naps do, my confused state collapsed swiftly and cleanly. Moments later I was awake, and felt more alert and capable than I had in years. Astonishingly so, in fact. The light had shifted golden, through a window that was just out of sight, but I felt as though I could see the sky with my own eyes.

I could also still feel that indescribable wrongness in everything, even down to how I think. But if anything could be said about it, I was less distracted by the wrongness by this point.

The nurse came over to the bedside carrying a cup of tea, and I smiled to myself at how even tender care can be synthesised into routine. Now that I could see the nurse's face, I was puzzled to find a much older person than I was expecting. In turn, that got me to wondering why I thought *that*, at all. From his face he was clearly younger than me, so why the offhand impression that he was ancient? My stare must have lingered too long, for I caught a look of reproach as he turned away, as though he were used to people staring at him oddly.

"Do you know what year it is?" It was Milky Shadow, aloud

for the first time, but hands in pockets now and standing at the foot of the bed.

“Nineteen”, I muttered automatically and with a little huff, even though I knew it was just routine. I became distracted, enraptured still by how twilight had been smeared across the white brick wall. And for those bricks themselves, each crisp and unique, the mortar squished here and there between them. When was the last time I could see across a room like that, or with this clarity at any range? I flicked my gaze back into the eyes of Milky. As it turns out, Milky has clogged pores, and tends to miss a spot around his right nostril when shaving.

“Yes, nineteeeen-what... go on,” he coaxed with a smile.

“Just nineteen, what are you stupid?” it all poured out of my mouth before I could stop it. Mortified, I shook my head and said in a gentler tone, “February, Twenty-nineteen”. I could feel looks being tossed around the room, but I was running out of patience with the name and date routine.

“Look, I’m sitting down,” I gestured at my prone body. The nurse chuckled after a moment, caught off guard. “What has happened to Hannah, I need to know”, I could feel my throat closing, and a hot flush needled its way up my face. Great, crying. I didn’t mean to start in on that.

“May I at least have my phone, that must have been in my pocket”, I managed.

The doctor took a seat beside the bed and stared for a long moment, then reached over to hand me the now drinkable tea. “A phone in your pocket you say? I don’t think we’ve seen anything like that. But we’ll get somebody to check on this Hannah, is she a friend of yours, do you have a last name?”

“Hannah Green, of course, you must have that on file. She’s my daughter!” I squeaked into the quiet room.

Eyebrows raised, chin tucked, the pencil was scratching

across the clipboard again. “How old are you?”

“I’m thirty-six, it’s February 2019, and I want to know if my daughter is alive! Where’s my phone?”

I knew in that moment that I should be mad, by all rights, but the way *mad* felt to me right now felt... delicious. Screaming and weeping, I found myself drifting away from myself, up toward the middle of the room, and then in a great rush I was sliding off to the floor, caught and rolled back into the bed. Bustling and urgency all around me. People shouting in codes.

Filled with anger and the taste of strawberries, I tried again to sit up, but lost it all to the mist.

I wasn’t sure whether to call them days, my periods of strange lucidity, but it gave me a certain comfort to think of them that way. This time I awoke to silence. It had grown darker outside, and only a feeble dash of pink light still stained the wall. I smiled at the memory of yesterday’s glory, and gingerly went through the act of sitting up.

I began to examine myself. I’d gone from horror to acceptance to a powerful need to understand. I thought to proceed about it in a meticulous fashion, that is after all what I’m good at, what I’ve trained myself for years to be good at. My fingernails were long, maybe a month long, but embedded in fingers that I could *remember* having. I reached out for the cup of water that had been left for me, and stared at my hand when my arm could reach no further, unable to grasp what I clearly should be able to.

Breaking my startled state, I could hear footsteps approaching the door. I risked swiftly lying back down, my head pounding with a furious headache all of the sudden, and so it was in this distracted state of pain, on the third day of

this strange dream, that my two dead parents burst into the room.

Dad was wearing his typical flannel all buttoned up, he never had a sense of cool, and mother looked somehow my age. Both were red-rimmed and pensive, and then it was all a rush of weeping and old forgotten smells.

I couldn't understand how, with nothing around me making any sense at all, that despite all of that I still felt that I was home. I sobbed into their shoulders until collectively we all ran out of breath, and subsided into a quiet huddle.

There was a tapping on the door, and the moment was lost, Milky politely pushing the door open. We broke apart, and as their contact left me, the strangeness of it all tipped back up the fulcrum, and I was once again lost. There was an accident, and I woke up in this strange world that seems to presume to be my past. I must remain meticulous, I chided myself.

"Mr. and Mrs. Green, Matthew," he walked over to the bed and held out his hand, "we haven't been properly introduced. My name is Dr. Poole. Shall we all take a seat?"

I laughed at the prior joke, and looked up to see Dr. Poole hastily looking away from me. My heightened level of sense from "yesterday" still persisted, and again I found it difficult to not become distracted by the amount of detail my eyes, ears, nose and even skin was able to detect. Chairs scuffed across the floor, pieces of clothing were rustled, and Dr. Milky Poole spoke.

"Matthew has, it seems, had an interesting experience. To start from the beginning," he nodded in my direction, "you were hit by an car three weeks ago, Matthew, you were walking back from your friend's house, and the driver was drunk. It was your head that took the worst of it. You've been in a

coma since then, one that you've just awoken from."

I found myself reaching for the back of my head, the pain from the headache still lingering. "But that's not right," I said, "well okay the accident maybe, but I was driving. I was driving to pick up my daughter, as I told you yesterday!"

I looked over at my parents, irrationally thinking they would surely have my back on this, but found my pleas trailing off as I met their gaze of sympathetic shock. "Yesterday," my father looked up confused, and I caught Dr. Poole trying to discretely quiet him with a gesture of the hand.

"And this brings us to the present day," Dr. Poole continued as though there had been no interruption, "it has been known for some time now that patients in a coma can sometimes experience vivid dreams, and sometimes those dreams can even take an ongoing narrative."

"No, that's enough," I said, "this isn't real you see, I am just a regular guy. I'm an accountant, I have... well, I had..." everything suddenly felt strange coming out of my mouth.

With that voice.

How could I speak of Alison while sounding like a little brat version of myself?

"Some of these ongoing narrative dreams have been known to span decades of perceived time, upon awakening. Imagine it as though your whole life, as you lived it thus far, were suddenly shattered by waking up from a dream you were having as a kid.

"Well, in this case the cause itself for the dream is extraordinary, but then is that not more reason to accept such an extraordinary dream?"

"I want to know that my daughter is okay!", I interrupted loudly, and for a moment, a strange look flickered within and through the faces of the doctor, his father, his mother.

Dr. Poole straightened his shoulder slightly and began again, “As I say, imagine a lived life like that, all gone.”

I collapsed back in bed and sighed, “This is so fucked, wait till I tell Reddit.”

“Matthew Andrew Green,” came down the voice of mother. The surreal took over my mind again, that strange overlapping of long lost instincts taking over thoughts and actions. Before I knew it I was muttering an apology into my paper robe. I felt her hand wrap around mine, and I clung to it. “Who’s Redding?” I heard father whispering. Mother shaking her head. How could I explain.

“We have a special program that I think would help Matthew out. Let me just get you the pamphlet, so you can look over the details.”

I closed my eyes to hide the forming tears. The pillow scarcely eased the pain, but I relished the way it felt despite. I let the words of adults wash over me as I slipped my tongue between the missing tooth. Nobody would believe me, how could they.

So if they never will, I’ll just have to learn how to play along.

After all, one of these days, I’m going to wake up.

chapter seven

Dañiel Garcia

THERE'S NOTHING WORSE THAN lying in a hospital bed, looking out the window, and being bored to death. At least for me, especially now. The night had been frustratingly busy but quiet. I'm sure you know what I mean: the typical hospital night, where there isn't much going on but you can always hear someone doing something. The kind of night where you just want to sleep and forget the persistent smell of disinfectant.

As the morning light shines through the window I wish I could leave this stifling room. Back to my job and my life. Neither the doctors nor my parents believed me when I woke up from the crash that I'm actually 36. Maybe I can convince them today. I push the thought aside as a knock sounds from the door.

"Come in," I say. It's probably just another nurse, come to take my temperature. At least in the 90s there are still more pretty female nurses than males, I think to myself as the door opens.

My face must have a serious look of disappointment to it as the head of a lanky girl pops in, looks at me, and asks: "Are

you still sick, Matty?"

I look at her for a moment before realising who it is. Lanky with long brown hair tied into a ponytail, 17 years before she cut it down to shoulder length.

I manage to say "Hi, Lucy, I wasn't expecting you," before her expression turns into disappointment.

"Why? I asked my mom to bring me here when they said you were in the hospital," she says.

"I appreciate the concern but right now I'm not in the mood for condolences. I'm waiting for the doctors to figure out what happened to me, so I can get out of this predicament."

"You sound kind of strange. What's wrong with you?"

Her genuine look of concern catches me off-guard. "I'm not supposed to be a kid anymore."

"Oh, I know what that is. It's puberty. My parents say that a lot lately," Lucy says with absolute earnestness. "I didn't know they keep you in the hospital for it."

I can't help but to chuckle a little. "No, that's not it. I'm an adult. I have an adult life as an internet investor."

Lucy looks confused. "Internet? Like the thing my daddy uses at home? That makes all the beeping noises and takes hours to show a picture?"

"What? No!" I stop my thought. "Yes! But different, faster."

"That doesn't make sense. How hard did you hit your head?" Lucy asks.

"I'm fine, Lucy." I rub my head to make the point but her look tells me it has the opposite effect. "Look, I'm actually 36 years old. I will be 36 again in 2019. I'm married and have a daughter." I pause. "I was married and have a daughter. Will have a daughter." This time travel thing is confusing. How do

they keep it straight in the movies?

"Are we still friends when you're married?" Lucy's brows wrinkle in doubt.

"Of course we're still friends. We've been best friends for ages, even as adults."

Lucy's face beams. "What are we like? What do I do?"

How do you explain over 20 years of struggling to a 12 year old? "We both work hard. I work in accounting and you're an architect."

Lucy's head rears back. "That doesn't sound like much fun or what I'd like to do."

I let out a sigh. "It's not supposed to be fun. It's work. I work so I can support my family... at least my daughter. Even though I don't like my job I work hard and long hours to give her everything she needs."

"Why don't you do something else?"

"I can't. I have stuff to do. I want my adult life back. I want to be back in my time."

She looks at me with her familiar tilt of the head that says: "I don't believe you but I'll let you keep bluffing."

"That sounds silly," she says.

"What sounds silly, dear?" says a familiar voice by the door. It's my mother, followed by Lucy's mother as they enter the room with a Tupperware box full of cupcakes.

Lucy puts her hands on her hips, prescient of her adult self. "Matt says he's old and married, and has a daughter."

"That sounds nice," Lucy's mother says.

My mother's face betrays a faint hint of worry for the merest fraction of a moment. The others haven't noticed. A pain jolts through my chest. I know my mother well enough to know that she'll start to worry and be restless for weeks. Even though I want to find a cure for my present condition and

think that all of this is probably just a dream, I can't help wanting my mother, real or not, to not worry about me.

"That was just my dream." I quickly say.

Lucy gives me a wide eyed pout. "That's not what you just said."

"A lot of people dream to get married, Lucy." Her mother opens the Tupperware box and hands each of us a cupcake with a thick layer of frosting. "Although it's usually girls that do that."

Lucy accepts the cupcake with a hungry look. "I'm a girl and I don't do that!" She finishes hers in three huge bites and looks greedily over to the rest of the pile.

"Planning for the future might not be a bad idea," my mom says. "I should make a savings account for your wedding. How about that, Matthew?" She lets out a relaxed laugh and shares a knowing look with Lucy's mother.

I look at the offered cupcake in my hands. I haven't eaten one in ages. Not since I started my diet to slim down together with Alison after Hannah's first birthday. Alison had been a little depressed that her body hadn't snapped back into the shape it had before. I told her it was fine but also noticed that I had gained a little as well. I suggested we could both challenge ourselves and try cutting down on the sugar together. It had gone surprisingly well. We both felt healthier and energetic. It felt like we could work hard, raise a child, and travel the world. All without breaking a sweat.

The sweet smell of sugary frosting breaks me out of my delirious memories. Sweet vanilla frosting on a lemon cupcake. Lucy is already on her second cupcake as I hesitantly raise the cupcake to my mouth. The aroma I remember from my childhood, my real childhood, wafts up into my nose. Mouthwatering pleasure beckons me to take a bite out of this

moist, luscious morsel of perfection. The craving I have makes me forget the gruelling years of calorie-counting, running, and all the frustrations that led to my divorce.

That first bite sends waves of joy through my mind, a familiar tingling rushes along my body. It feels like the closest thing to an orgasm my pre-teen self could ever hope to achieve. The third bite is already done as the feeling subsides. Without much thought I immediately ask: "Can I have another one?"

Lucy's mother hands me another cupcake. This one has chocolate frosting. "Sure, dear. Eat up till you feel better. They taste better than that stale hospital food."

"You can have all the cupcakes you want, but only for today," my mom says.

The second cupcake tastes as good as the first, if not better. Absentmindedly I count the calories of each cupcake, of each bite. I know I wouldn't be able to burn-off the calories as quickly as a child with my adult body. Might as well enjoy it now, although I know the cupcakes will catch up with me in my twenties.

In fact, I know a lot of things now. Things I didn't know in my twenties. Like the kinds of sports I'd actually like that I didn't do back then, such as martial arts. The taste of foods that don't consist of 50% sugar or that the internet won't always be a crawl along a gravel road. Maybe it's not a bad idea to start over and make a new beginning with the knowledge I have. Hell, I should invest in the stock-market now.

I look at Lucy for a long moment as she devours her fourth cupcake, occasionally glancing between me and the dwindling pile. I see her now with a more experienced mind, noticing things I never paid attention to as a child. We had always been close, like siblings. Or was it more? I can't

remember exactly, it's been over 20 years. I wonder what it would be like to date teenage Lucy or to marry adult Lucy instead of Alison. Would our marriage end the same way? What's the legal age in Chicago? Is it legal if a 30 something mind is in the body of a teen? My head hurts. That sounds creepy when I think about it.

Besides, if this is real what would happen to Hannah if I never married Alison? Our marriage didn't work but we made a perfect little girl. I can't just let Hannah disappear. I don't want to risk that happening.

But the allure of those sweet cupcakes also keeps me enthralled with the idea of change. Maybe I could work things out with Alison and avoid all the mistakes. Each bite fills me with confidence. I can avoid the bad decisions, make the promises I know will work. I can do it. I can make all the positive changes. I just have to convince everyone that I'm my healthy 12 year old self.

As I reach for the next cupcake the door opens again. This time it's the doctor. He notices the dwindling pile of cupcakes. A faint look of a disapproval crosses his face as he assesses the situation. He shrugs his shoulders as if arguing with two women, hungry children, and a pile of cupcakes were a hopeless cause this early in the day.

"Well, Mrs. Green, besides a few superficial scrapes there isn't anything physically wrong that we can find. But, we'd like to keep Matthew in for another few days for observation. Just in case there might be a concussion. If there are no other symptoms he'll be able to go home soon."

"I feel fine now," I say as I bite into my next cupcake.

The doctor raises an eyebrow, as if he would be the judge of that.

I give him the best frosting-smeared-smile my child-face

can manage.

chapter eight

Alex Brantham

MONDAY MORNING CAME ROUND, and there was no escaping the awful truth. I was going to have to go to school. It had been pretty shit the first time round, and I really couldn't see how it would be any better on a second attempt.

I tried, I really did. Headache. Sore throat. A fake sneeze. But Mom wasn't having any of it, just like before.

"Matthew, you know you have to go back," she said, in that whiney voice used by adults when they have complete moral certainty and, more importantly, all of the power. "Just take it easy, the teachers will understand. Stick with Lucy and you'll be fine."

It wasn't the teachers I was worried about.

Sixth grade. I wasn't completely sure about this, but wasn't that the year when Bruce McCulloch had been around? Twice the size of everyone else, and half the brains?

"And all your friends will be waiting to see you." Mom hadn't given up, even as she handed me my coat. "Johnny and Manuel and Consuela and all the rest."

There was more, but I wasn't listening. I was trying

desperately to remember who she was talking about. Johnny, yes, that was fine. I knew who Johnny was, though I'd hardly call him a friend. But who the hell was Manuel? And what did we actually do in school during sixth grade, anyway? My head hurt just thinking about it.

Lucy was waiting for me at the sidewalk. I stepped alongside her and we started to walk to the bus stop. I wasn't sure which was most disconcerting: the fact that she was taller than me (had that really ever been the case?), or that I was aware of her emerging shape in a way that I'm pretty sure I hadn't been before.

She prattled, I listened, and we got to the stop just as the bus arrived so there was no time to get into conversation with anyone else.

A verbal chorus greeted me as we walked down the bus to take a pair of seats. Some friendly, some teasing, some hostile. One boy with intense red hair and glasses, sitting across the aisle, leant over. "Hey, Matt, you okay? We heard you got pretty busted up?"

I was pretty sure I was supposed to know his name, but hadn't a clue what it might be. I mumbled something and hoped he wouldn't notice. He looked puzzled.

Lucy leaned across me. "Hey, Johnny, it's okay, Matt's not himself yet."

So that was Johnny. Recollections dribbled into my consciousness, fragments that steadfastly refused to assemble themselves in the right order, like a jigsaw puzzle consisting only of sky. He was the kid who liked baseball, whose life had been turned upside-down by the players' strike.

When exactly had that ended? Sometime about now, I thought. For a millisecond my hand started the movement to where my phone should be, so I could Google it. Then I

stopped: that wasn't going to happen. How did we manage back then? I was going to need to work on that. But I was pretty sure it was soon.

I turned to him. "Still fretting over the baseball strike, Johnny? Don't worry, it'll be over before long."

He looked at me like I'd just landed from Mars. But before he had a chance to speak, someone else wanted to extend a warm hand of greeting.

Only this hand was balled into a fist, and struck me hard on my shoulder.

I spun round, to find myself staring at the ugly face that I immediately recalled as belonging to Bruce McCulloch, now sitting in the seat behind mine.

"Why'd you come back, Green? We were all hoping you'd die. Then we'd get an afternoon off school to go to your funeral."

The features of his face were almost exactly as I remembered them. The slightly flattened nose, the eyes just a fraction too close together, the tiny ears. And yet, although I recalled him as having been huge, this was just a boy. Bigger than me, granted, but still a kid.

I felt Lucy's hand on my elbow, gently pulling me back. "Ignore him, Matt, it's not worth it," she muttered.

I shrugged off her restraining hand and faced him, my body twisted in the seat and out into the aisle.

"The thing is, McCulloch," I said, my nose only inches from his, "I'm back and I'm staying. You weren't here last year, and next year you'll be somewhere else. So wind your neck in and mind your own business." I stared him straight in the eye, not wavering a single muscle.

The bus fell silent as we faced each other down. Crazy, really: if he'd really wanted to, he could have flattened me. But

he didn't.

Our confrontation ended with a lurch as the bus pulled up outside the school, and disembarkation began from the front. Lucy and Johnny both slipped in line behind me, creating a buffer to Bruce in case he changed his mind.

"Are you mad?" hissed Lucy after we'd stepped off.

"Don't give in to bullies," I said. This was what my Dad had said a million times, but I'd never previously taken it to heart. Now it was different, and I stepped confidently towards the school, following the line of kids towards the door.

"Matt!" called Lucy, by now a few steps behind.

I stopped and turned.

"Where are you going?" she asked. "That's the fifth grade entrance."

I looked around. The stream from the bus had split into several lines, each heading in a different direction. Damn. I'd forgotten that little detail. What else was waiting to trip me up?

Having survived the usual morning rituals – which came flooding back to me even as I lived through them – we had our first class of the day, math.

It would be fair to say that I was almost looking forward to this, my first real test of how much I had remembered from Before.

Quite a lot, it turned out.

Our teacher, Mrs Hernandez, had a knack of making simple things seem complicated, and her explanation of the methods for solving equations involving inequalities had most of the class scratching their heads.

I guess that having studied university-level math might have been something of an unfair advantage in this context, but when it came to the short quiz she gave out at the end,

there really wasn't much to detain me. I had it finished inside about three minutes and had time to look around as everyone else sucked their pencils and stared at the ceiling in case the answers were written there.

She saw me twiddling my thumbs and came over.

"It's all right, Matthew, no need to worry. I understand you've missed some classes and this might be a bit difficult for you. But just do your best."

I smiled and handed her the paper.

Her eyes creased as she took it from me and then, as she flipped through the pages of flawless answers, turned into a frown. "This is very good, Matthew. How did you –"

Much as I was enjoying my little moment of triumph, I wasn't ready to turn this into a drama just yet. I certainly didn't want to get into an explanation of what I'd been doing for the last thirty-six years.

So I kept it simple. "Oh, my Mom's been doing a bit of home-schooling while I was off," I said. "I guess we got lucky about the topic." I smiled, and she smiled and walked back to the front of the class still clutching my answers and shaking her head in disbelief.

Lucy looked over at me as this transaction completed. She had a frown of her own, which was a lot more disconcerting than that of Mrs Hernandez.

After lunch, I was hanging around with the kids in the yard. Johnny, Manuel, Mikey, and a tall kid whose name I hadn't caught up with yet. It felt strangely familiar as we talked about baseball (or rather the absence thereof) and basketball and other subjects expressly designed to exclude the girls.

Lucy, therefore, was elsewhere, in a group of her own. Every now and then I caught a glimpse of her looking in my

direction as if checking up on me. I could only afford to give her the very fleetest of glances back, otherwise this would have been seized upon by my comrades as evidence of ... well, they didn't really know what, but something.

On the far side of the yard, a gaggle of kids centred around Bruce McCulloch was shooting hoops. As the tallest by far, he dominated the group in every way. And yet there was something about the scene that disturbed me, though I couldn't put my finger on it. A memory, wrestling its way through the folds of time. Perhaps it would come to me.

Manuel was banging on about Michael Jordan. "Did you see the game on TV yesterday? They think he might be coming back! Boy, do the Bulls need him—"

"Horseshit," snorted Mikey. "I saw that too, and that other guy said there was no way he'd make a comeback. Why should he? He's done it all, no way he can be that good again."

More memories stirred.

"What date is it?" I asked.

They all stopped and stared. Finally Johnny broke the silence. "Wow, you really did get a bang on the head, didn't you? It's the thirteenth."

"Of March, right?" I was pretty sure it was, just checking.

The boys looked at each other and nodded, slowly.

"He'll be back," I said. "This coming weekend. Playing for the Bulls."

"No way," said Mikey.

"Dead cert," I said.

"Betcha he won't," said Mikey.

"How much?"

Mikey frowned. This wasn't our usual conversation, I was certain. But in the circumstances... "Five bucks," he said.

"Done." I held out my hand and we shook on it. "You

guys are witnesses, right?” I smiled at Mikey. “Just remember to bring the money in on Monday.”

The guys continued the debate but my mind wandered. This could be big. All I had to do was hang onto a few key memories – Superbowl results, election winners, that sort of thing. Stock market trends. When to buy bitcoin and, more importantly, when to sell. As long as I could remember enough details, I’d be made for life. Probably not a good idea to get too greedy, that would attract attention I wouldn’t want. Not enough to distort the market, just enough for me.

I was getting excited at the thought of it all, my happiness tempered only by the thought that I was going to have to live through those wretched teenage years all over again. But this time it would be different.

From across the yard, the shouting was louder. We all looked over, to see Bruce McCulloch showing off by hanging onto the basketball hoop and waving his feet about, encouraged by the shouts of his acolytes.

Another memory.

When I’d told Bruce on the bus that he wouldn’t be here next year, I knew that I was right without remembering why, exactly. And now it was coming back to me. An injury. Playing basketball in the yard at school. A freak accident that kept him out for months, after which we’d never seen him again.

The details of the incident eluded me, no matter how hard I reached out for them. I couldn’t form an image, at least not one that would hold steady for more than a second. But I was sure that the pole supporting the hoop was about to fall, and that he was going to break his arm in a particularly messy way.

Even a shit like McCulloch didn’t deserve that.

I broke away from my friends and sprinted across to the hoop. Bruce saw me coming: presumably he thought I was

coming to wind him up, or have a go at him. Whatever. He just swung all the harder, his gang cheering him on, as the pole began to move more and more, following his movement back and forth, not just bending but breaking.

“Get down, Bruce,” I yelled. “It’s going to fall.”

The boys standing around him turned to face me – I was making enough noise for a small army – but didn’t move aside. I bounced off first one and then another before finally wriggling through, trying to grab hold of Bruce.

But he still only saw an attacker, and kicked his legs at me, putting even more strain on the benighted pole, which I could now clearly see was about to snap.

I closed my eyes and threw myself at his knees, wrapping my arms around them. Just as my hands joined up behind him, a thunderclap struck and the pole gave way.

I fell, he fell, and the pole came down on us both. Bruce’s legs, having been caught in mid-flail, were bent behind him at an awkward angle and when we all came down I heard another fearful crack, almost as loud as the first. Bruce screamed in pain and I pushed myself up, taking the weight of the pole.

Unseen hands grabbed it and took it away, leaving me kneeling on the floor while Bruce waved his arms and shouted for help.

All I could do was stare at his leg, protruding at a nauseatingly unnatural angle.

One of the teachers, Mr Cervantes, was the first adult on the scene.

On either side, groups of kids were shouting their own version of events at him. It was all my fault, I’d attacked him. No, the pole was breaking and I’d been trying to help. I guess it all depended on where you were standing.

What was indisputable was, one, that the pole was rusted

and broken and, two, that Bruce was badly hurt and needed to be in hospital.

While the ambulance was on its way, I was escorted to sit outside the Principal's office to rest and, no doubt, face an inquisition. I didn't care about any of that. What mattered to me was that this had gone all horribly wrong. My memory of Bruce having hurt his arm was really clear, I was in no doubt of that at all. But my intervention had changed the outcome. Not for the better, granted, but it had changed.

So what did that mean?

Did it imply that actions I took now would change the course of events as I had first experienced them? Could I fix it so that things turned out better with Alison? If I didn't make whatever mistakes there had been, would she no longer want a divorce?

That would be good.

But, it might go the other way. Suppose I made things worse, as I had just done for poor Bruce? What if I messed things up so badly that I never met Alison in the first place? Would I be manipulating Hannah out of existence?

That was a future not to be contemplated under any circumstances.

There was more. What if I had the chance to stop catastrophes from happening? The Oklahoma bombing would be coming up soon.

9/11.

For a second I visualised calling the police about it, closer to the time, obviously. There were only two possible outcomes: either they'd dismiss me as a crank, or they'd believe me, in which case I'd be locked up as a conspirator. Either way it could do no good.

No, I was just going to have to keep my interventions to an

absolute minimum, if only for Hannah's sake.

At last the Principal, Mr Collins, emerged. "I've spoken with Mr Cervantes," he said. "He tells me that you were trying to help Bruce."

I nodded.

"Well done. I'm glad you did your best, especially when you've been, ah, unwell yourself. It'll be time to go home soon: I suggest you wait here until the bus goes. You can skip the rest of class this afternoon."

I sat quietly for the rest of the time, re-running the scenarios and options in my head. It didn't get any clearer.

When the final bell rang, I got up and headed for the bus lines, where Lucy soon found me.

"Are you okay?" she asked. "We were worried about you. I hope you didn't get into trouble, we all told Mr Cervantes what had happened."

"I'm fine, thanks."

There was a brief silence. She was clearly expecting me to say more.

"The Principal was fine, there was no problem," I added.

More silence, as we shuffled our way onto the bus and sat down.

After we'd been driving for a minute or two she'd had enough and turned to me. "So, Matt, are you going to tell me what's going on?"

chapter nine

Kimberlee Gerstmann

LUCY AND I LET the large door swing closed behind us as our eyes adjusted to the return to light. We crossed the hall and sat down against the wall opposite the theater they'd just left. I sucked hard on my straw, the last drops of my Coke slurped out of the large cup.

"You're going to have to take a major leak soon," Lucy pointed out, reaching her arms around and circling her bent knees.

"Whatever. That popcorn made me thirsty," I replied, feeling oddly relaxed for the moment. I stifled a burp. "I just couldn't take any more of that movie."

"You were DYING to see that movie before it came out. You're lucky it is still in theaters. For months all I heard from you was 'We have to see Billy Madison!' Now you don't like it? I keep telling you, something about you is off. You're weird all of a sudden."

"Uh, yeah. I told you," I said.

"Yeah, you told me a whole lot of crazy stuff in the hospital," Lucy replied. "None of it made sense." She hesitated. "My mom said that a lot of time when people suffer

trauma, they act weird and say strange things.”

“I told you, it wasn’t trauma. I don’t know why you can’t just accept it.”

“Maybe because it is too crazy for belief,” Lucy replied with a chuckle. She thought for a minute, rocking her feet from heels to toes to heels. “This isn’t Big. You aren’t Tom Hanks.”

“I know. He was a kid in an adult’s body. I’m an adult in a kid’s body,” I splayed my hands out and then relaxed them. “And, I didn’t make a wish on some weird carnival machine.” I shook my head.

“The others don’t seem to notice it as much,” she looked at me and tried to discern what was different. “Have you said anything to anyone else?”

I contemplated the group of friends still absorbed in the Billy Madison movie.

“No. I can’t trust anyone else. Not when you don’t believe me,” I stated. I put my elbows on my bent knees and then rested my head in my hands.

Lucy rubbed the back of her neck. She bit her lip. She hated to see me frustrated. I felt horrible for letting it happen.

“Okay. Tell me more about the future,” she said. “Tell me something good this time. Something that will make me believe you,” she encouraged.

I looked over at her. She appeared sincere. I glanced at my watch. There wasn’t much time before the movie would finish. Then we would be swept back into the birthday festivities.

“Michael Jordan will be back to play for the Bulls,” I said.

“No way. He retired.” She leaned over and punched me in the arm. “That’s a bunch of BS. And you don’t even like basketball.”

“That’s why I can’t tell you exactly when, but I know that

he comes back, and then retires again, and comes back out of retirement at least one other time.”

“That’s crazy talk,” she shook her head.

“I think he even tried to play baseball.”

“Shut. Up!” she stated laughing, still shaking her head.

I decided to take another direction.

“There are computers everywhere in the future. In fact, our phones are basically little handheld computers,” I said.

“I’ve seen a couple of those mobile phones,” Lucy said. “They aren’t ‘little’ like you say.”

“They are in the future. They get really small. And then they get bigger again and everyone stares at them all day.” I smiled, thinking about the pull of the screen and how we established a rule in the house about the use of our phones.

“Next!” she barked, unimpressed by my explanation of cell phone habits.

“When we’re in college, you and I steal a microwave and a cat from your weird roommate,” I stated, smiling in spite of myself at the memory I’d conjured up. The night was absolutely vivid in my mind. I could almost feel the grime on my hands that transferred from the bottom of the small red microwave as I’d carried it to my souped-up Honda.

Lucy laughed out loud.

“Why would we do THAT?” she howled, rolling toward me and knocking me off balance.

“The girl you were living with hated cleaning. She left everything a mess. She would only clean the inside of the microwave, nothing else. She was obnoxious about it if you left even a spot of food in it. The microwave became a huge battleground between the two of you. I never fully understood it. One night you’d had it with her and wanted to move out. She’d done a bunch of petty stuff to you, and you were sick

of it. She owed you money for some bills and refused to pay you, so you took that microwave. It was probably only worth \$40 brand new, but that wasn't the point. You wanted to irritate her."

"And the cat?" she asked, her voice incredulous.

"Ah, Dempsey. Your neighbours left him behind when they moved. He was this scraggly white cat that had beautiful ice-green eyes. He liked to visit with you while you were doing homework. Your roommate took him in, but she didn't treat him very well. She never cleaned his litterbox, she'd forget to feed him, and she screamed at him if he got fur on her clothes. You didn't want him to suffer with her... so we stole him."

Lucy looked adorable. Her eyes were bright. Her mouth was open in an O of surprise. I didn't realise how much I had missed her.

"You just made that up," she gasped.

"Nope. One hundred percent truth," I replied.

"So what did I take in college? What am I?" she asked, enjoying my stories.

"You're a badass architect."

A laugh escaped from between her closed lips. "Lies. All lies. I don't even like math. There's a ton of math in architecture," she exclaimed, and then thought about it. "Isn't there?"

I smiled. "Yeah, there's quite a bit of math. But you're good at it. You definitely know what you're doing."

"What else?"

I wracked my brain for something definitive that I could tell her in order to convince her.

"What about my mom and dad? Do they stay the same?" she questioned.

I felt like I had been punched in the gut. *Her mom.* It came flooding back in vignettes. I remembered the late-night phone calls during college. The conversations from the hospital. Then hospice. Her mother's funeral. Her dad falling apart. Tears stung my eyes. I looked in the other direction trying to buy myself a few seconds of time. I reached for my cup and slurped on my empty Coke again as a distraction.

I spoke, willing my voice not to shake. "They love each other so very much. Always."

Lucy smiled, not sensing my slight deception. She sat in silence for a moment.

"What about you? You're married?" she asked, her voice timid and quiet.

"Yes," I answered, thinking about the state of my marriage. *Could I still call it a marriage?*

"And do you love her as much as my parents love each other?"

"Yes, but... it's complicated," I responded. My voice trailed off, my eyes focusing on something in the distance.

Her face scrunched in concentration.

"Hey, that's how you can prove it," she started. "Tell me who your wife is. We can find her." A large smile beamed across her face. "Prove it, buddy." She gave me a sharp poke in the ribs.

An odd feeling crept into my chest at the idea of finding Alison. For a moment I felt stunned that I hadn't thought of it first. *Find Alison.*

There were so many movies about time travel and messing with the past, present and future. I wondered what sort of disruptions I could cause. *If that is even a thing.* I reasoned.

"Let's do it," Lucy said, enthusiasm causing her face to flush.

The thought of Googling her parent's address instantly popped into my head. Then I remembered there was no Google. My family doesn't even have a computer. Neither does Lucy.

"I need to find a computer," I stated.

A sudden bustle of activity startled me. A group of people began pouring into the hallway. The movie had come to an end. Geoff, Rudy, Hunter, Julie, and Ramon staggered out of the door, bumping into each other, laughing.

"Dude... you missed some epic lines," Geoff said.

Rudy reached out a hand to pull me to my feet. Ramon did the same for Lucy. Julie gave Lucy a raised eyebrow. Lucy glared back at her. Julie threaded her arm through Lucy's and pulled her forward, away from us boys. Lucy looked back at me. When our eyes met, she nodded her head toward Geoff. At first, I didn't know what her point was, but then I realised that Geoff's family had a home computer. I smiled back, letting her know I understood. *Smart kid.*

As a group we walked to the theater's exit and headed to the L train. Everyone was laughing and shouting Adam Sandler quotes over each other on their way back to Geoff's. I remained quiet, thinking about how we could track down Alison's family. I scrolled through my mental rolodex of memories trying to pick out pieces of Alison's history that would be helpful.

After the cake and presents were finished, I found my way over to the Henderson computer.

"Hey Geoff, can I check this out?" I asked, acting like it was no big deal.

"What do you want to do?" Geoff replied.

"I'd love to look up my cousins," I lied. "I haven't seen them in ages, and it would be cool to see what I could find."

Geoff rolled his eyes, not sold on the “coolness” of my request. He turned on the monitor and wiggled the mouse to life. He clicked on the dial-up button and the sounds of AOL connecting filled the room. Lucy watched from across the room.

I shook my head in disbelief. How could I have forgotten that sound and the annoyance of dial-up.

WebCrawler was one of the choices on the screen. I clicked on People Search and entered NEIL BROADLEY into the search bar. There were no results. *Damn.*

Not expecting anything, I put Pamela’s name into the search bar. Nada.

My mind felt blank. *How did we do this back in the day?*

“No luck?” Geoff asked, looking over my shoulder.

“Nah,” I replied, closing the search window.

He hit the button to turn off the screen and we got back to the party even though it was winding down. The other kids started peeling off or getting picked up. Lucy and I left together, walking the few short blocks to our street.

“Were you able to find anything?” Lucy’s curiosity was piqued.

“No,” the stress I felt was evident in my voice.

“What are their names? What did you try?” she asked.

“Pamela and Neil Broadley in Indianapolis,” I answered. “I tried both in people search. Nothing came up at all.”

“Did you try Alison?” she asked.

“No. There’s no use. In 2018 there’s a chance that a kid would have an online presence, but not now.”

Lucy looked confused but didn’t ask.

“Sorry,” she said, her attitude shifting. “But you still have to prove it.” She gave a half smile.

“Just drop it, okay.” My voice came out sharper than I

intended. Frustration roiled inside of me.

Lucy stopped mid step.

“Wow. Chill out,” she admonished.

I stopped and turned to look at her. Her light brown hair was hanging in her face and she looked vulnerable and hurt.

“I’m sorry.”

“It doesn’t feel like it,” she replied.

“I’m just frustrated,” I said.

“Because I don’t believe you?” she asked.

“It’s not just that,” I started. “I just don’t know what I am supposed to do. It’s hard to explain. I feel trapped, and... ”

“Okay,” she said, her voice quiet.

We walked in silence for two blocks.

“I’ll see you tomorrow?” she asked as we rounded the corner to our street.

“Sure,” I said.

“See ya,” she said over her shoulder as she crossed toward her house. Her voice sounded flat.

Saturday morning I woke to the spring sun streaming through the blinds and the phone ringing in the hallway. I sandwiched my head between pillows and tried to go back to sleep. It felt nice to sleep in without any worries. It was one of the only upsides to my current situation. As long as I did my homework and kept up with my chores, my parents did not care too much about how late I slept.

Moments later, I heard a soft rap at my door.

“Matthew. Phone. It’s Lucy.” My mom had opened the door a few inches to see if I was awake.

“Okay,” I replied, only slightly surprised.

I jumped out of bed and went into the hall to grab the phone.

“Guess who?” Lucy asked.

“I know it’s you, doofus,” I said to her.

“No. Not me. Guess who I found?” she asked.

“What?”

“Guess. Who. I. Found.” She said again.

Granted, I just woke up, but I felt more than confused.

Lucy ignored my lack of response.

“Alison’s parents. I got their phone number.”

“What? How?” I asked. My mind was spinning.

“Directory assistance. Duh.”

“Ahhhh.” I replied.

“It isn’t proof though. You could be giving me the name of your dad’s dentist for all I know.”

“So you’re telling me that you found out they are real and you’re still hassling me?” I asked.

“Yep,” Lucy stated. “You deserve it for being an assclown.” I could hear the smile in her voice. “Well, do you want their number, or what?” she asked.

“Hold on.” I ran to my room to grab a notebook and pen. “Okay.”

“It’s 483-555-0146.”

“Cool.”

“So when do we call them?” she asked.

“You didn’t call them already?”

“Nah. It’s your case to prove.”

“How soon will you be here?” I asked.

“I’m on my way,” she answered.

I hung up and went to my room to throw on some clothes.

Ten minutes later I heard the front door and then Lucy’s feet bounding up the stairs.

“So, what’s the plan?” she asked.

“You’re going to call and ask for Alison,” I stated.

“No way. I told you that this was your case to prove,” she responded.

“Yeah, but she’s younger than us. It would be totally creepy to have a boy calling to ask for her,” I said.

“I didn’t think about that,” Lucy replied.

“And anyway, I was thinking about it, and most likely she will not be home. She should be at her ballet lesson. I remember her telling me that her mom forced her to take ballet for years and years. She was forever frustrated that she missed out on things because she had a standing appointment at Miss Elaine’s every Saturday morning.”

The left side of Lucy’s mouth was curled into a skeptical smirk.

“You’ve put a lot of thought into this,” she said. “Why do I feel like you are punking me?”

I shrugged my shoulders.

“You’re the one who wanted proof,” I said.

Lucy flopped into my desk chair, picked up the phone and scooted the chair in my direction. I stood next to her, the phone between us, so I could hear too. She punched the numbers in and we waited as the phone rang. Four rings. *Ugh. No one’s home.*

Lucy was about to hit *end* when the ringing stopped.

“Lo?” a man’s voice and rushed breathing.

Lucy swallowed hard. “Uh, hello?” she said. There was a pause. I took a step back and looked at her, my eyes wide and pleading. “Is Alison home?” she asked.

“No. No, she’s not,” my father-in-law responded. His voice sounded the same, but obviously younger, less gruff, less officious. “Can I tell her who called?” he asked.

Lucy looked at me, panic evident on her face.

“Emily,” I mouthed. When Alison was pregnant with

Hannah we had done all of the research on names for girls. Emily was the most popular name for many years. Alison had confessed to knowing many Emilys in her past.

“Okay,” her dad stated and was going to hang up.

I waved my arms to get Lucy’s attention.

“Uh, Mr. Broadley,” she started, looking to me for guidance.

“Ask for her address,” I whispered.

Lucy looked confused but continued. “Can I have your address?” she asked.

It caught my father-in-law off guard.

“Our address?” he asked bluntly.

Lucy shrugged and looked at me. I mimed writing.

“Uh, yeah,” Lucy stammered. “Uh. I wanted to send her an invitation to my party.”

“Ahhh, okay. It is 6601 East Hampton Drive.”

“Thank you,” Lucy said. She finished writing the address on my notebook. She hung up the phone.

“Wow,” she said. “That was intense.” She spun the chair around, her feet up as she whirled. She put her feet down and stopped. “Now what?” she asked, leaning forward, her hands pressed against the seat.

“Well, we found her. That’s the proof.” I said, unsure of what I was feeling.

“Yeaahhh, buuuuut,” Lucy argued.

“But what? She exists! That’s it. There’s the proof.”

“But are we going to go see her?” she asked. Her eyes sparkled from excitement.

“I can’t drag you to Indianapolis,” I stated. “You’re a kid, and it could be dangerous.”

“Uh, look in the mirror. You’re a kid too,” she reasoned.

She had a point.

The week passed in a blur. We spent lunch breaks plotting our alibis, pouring over bus routes, and arguing about potential scenarios. By the time Saturday morning arrived, I felt like we had already taken the trip and I was mentally exhausted. Neither of us talked much as we headed into the bus station. It was too early and I didn't feel fully awake. Our footsteps echoed across the marble floors. We stepped up to the counter and purchased our tickets. As we walked to the gate, Lucy appeared pale.

"We don't have to do this," I said.

"We have the tickets," she replied.

"But we can still back out," I answered.

She contemplated it for a minute.

"But then I wouldn't have proof," she smiled.

A little over three hours later we arrived in Indianapolis. The morning sunshine beamed down on us as we neared the ballet studio. Our timetable was slightly off, so we picked up the pace and put a little hustle in our steps. I could not imagine coming all that way and then missing Alison.

"It should be up in the next block," I told Lucy as I folded the map for what felt like the hundredth time.

I found myself bounding up the street. Lucy's legs weren't as long, so she struggled to keep up with me. We crossed the intersection and I started scanning the buildings ahead for signage. I spotted it about fifty yards ahead. Miss Elaine's Dance Studio. I half walked half ran to get there. Lucy fell farther behind, her backpack jostling against her, making a whooshing sound with each step.

I reached the studio and stopped short. There were windows across the entire front of the building. A full array of girls stretched in front of the windows. They were all dressed

in black bodysuits and pink leotards. A row of mirrors lined the wall behind them so it looked like there were even more bodies packed into the room. To the left, there was a small waiting area filled with parents. I spotted my mother-in-law almost instantly and found myself ducking before she could see me. I realised that was silly since she wouldn't recognise me, but still couldn't get past that feeling of being exposed. While other parents were talking amongst themselves, Pamela's stern face was turned toward the girls, intently watching Alison. I followed her gaze and spotted my wife. My breath caught in my throat. My vision blurred with tears as I looked at her. Innocent and beautiful. Just like Hannah. I missed them both so much I felt sick to my stomach.

Lucy caught up to me, panting slightly. "Where..." she started. She took one look at my face and had her proof.

I held up a finger and pointed Alison out to Lucy.

"Proof," she whispered.

chapter ten

B. Morris Allen

IT'S SATURDAY. A DAY for sleeping in, for pretending I've successfully played sick and avoided school, for luxuriating in having nothing to do. The sun is shining through the window, flickering shadows of new green leaves over the carpet and the clothes I didn't put away last night. There's a cardinal singing outside the window.

I'm tired already. What's the point of it all, other than to taunt me? Einstein claimed god is not malicious, but if he's not poking his finger in my eye now, what the hell *is* he doing? The cardinal's looking for a mate. I had one and lost her. Was about to lose her. Will lose her. Whatever the tense is. And spring? That's just sarcasm. *Take your damned metaphors and go back to Heaven, God. Leave me alone.*

"Buddy?" There's a knock on my bedroom door. God's got no sense of subtlety.

"Dad, I'm sleeping." I haven't been for over an hour. I just don't see any reason to get up. I got up today 24 years ago, and what good did it do me?

"Buddy, I made pancakes." He cracks the door open. "You

seemed a little down yesterday. Silver dollar pancakes – stacks of them, margarine, syrup. Glass of OJ.”

What you don’t remember about being twelve is how drive by your body you are. Not by hormones, the way you are later, but by your gut and your energy. I’m already sitting up by the time I remember that life is pointless and I don’t want to live it again.

“That’s the spirit, buddy. And your new friend already came by and said she’d come back around 10. See you downstairs in a minute.”

Lucy’s not my new friend. I’ve known her all my life. Even here (now?) in 1995, I’ve known her for a couple of years. But I don’t have a lot of friends, so to Dad she’s still the new one. And she’s the only one who knows what’s going on. It’s not a lot, but it’s enough to get me up and moving. Plus, I’m hungry.

“I asked your friend to stay for breakfast, but she didn’t want to.”

“Lucy doesn’t like pancakes, Dad.” How does he not know that? She came over for breakfast half of every summer during high school. Of course, that hasn’t happened yet. “She says...” what was it? “She says they’re like dish sponges soaked in sugar.”

He chuckles. “Should I be offended?” I know he’s not. I’ve already polished off a dozen silver dollar pancakes, and he’s loading me up with more.

“She’s a strange one, that girl.” I know Mom likes Lucy. She thinks we’d make a cute couple, and she’s not subtle about it. “I asked if you were going to play board games, and she said ‘I think Matt is too old for board games, Ms. Green.’ Well, she’s your age, isn’t she?”

“Three months younger,” I say between pancakes. It’s

funny how all this stuff comes back to me. Like it was yesterday.

“Well, there’s no need to smirk about it. Being older is not an accomplishment.”

“Just a merit badge you get by default.”

“I like that,” says Dad. He should. I heard it from him about twenty years from now. It’s weird, seeing him now, with a full head of hair, still in the prime of his life. It’s also weird that a twelve-year old thinks of his father as being in the prime of his life. Parents are always old, no matter how old they are. But he’s about the age now that I will be, when I screw everything up. Dad didn’t do that.

I can feel the tears coming – it’s so easy, when you’re young – and I scramble over to give him a hug and hide them in his shirt.

“You’re a good man. Dad.” He pulls me tight and says “You too, son. You too.” I can hear that tears aren’t that hard for fathers either.

I move over and give Mom a hug too, and then we’re saved by the bell.

“Got to go,” I say through a snuffle. “That’s Lucy.”

I can feel, behind me, the ‘What was *that* about?’ looks, but I can feel they’re happy.

“You were crying,” says Lucy. We’re down by the Hoeffner’s empty lot, where they’re going to build a new house, one of these days. Except, they never do, I realise. Their son gets sick and they move to Minneapolis to be near him instead. He’s in high school now, just down the street.

“Yeah,” I say, and I can see her eyes widen. Twelve year old boys don’t admit to crying, I remember. They do it, but they never say so. “My parents,” I say. “They’re just... They stay

together. They're happy."

"What about..." I can see the hope in her eyes. "What about mine?" she almost whispers.

They're having some trouble now, I remember. "They make it," I tell her in a rush. "They make it." It's not pretty; there's an affair, and a lot of fighting. But they stay together. "They argue, but it's not about you. They love you." I know it's a cliché as I say it, and for the parents it's never in question. But for Lucy it is, and I remember how it hurt her. She turns away now, because I guess eleven year old girls don't cry that much either.

"I don't." I'm trying to lighten the mood, but she flinches, and I kick myself for being stupid. "I don't make it, I mean. I get divorced." It sounded funnier when I thought of it, but now the pain comes back, and it's bad.

"You said you were *going to* get divorced," Lucy says. "Before the accident."

"What's the difference?" I turn off the road into our little path across the Hoeffner's lot that leads into the woods, and the little creek. There's a log/bridge we sit on, play on, talk on. "It was gonna happen. She already *said* so." Alison. My wife Ex-wife. To be ex-wife.

"But why? You didn't say, before. And what about your daughter, Hannah?" I can see she's still thinking about her own parents, and why not?

"You like her," I say. "You're her favorite aunt. You Instagram each other all the time." I remember, Hannah coming out of her bedroom one night, to show me a picture Lucy sent her. "She likes aardvarks."

"They're cute," says Lucy with a firm nod. "Like naked armadillos."

That's what Hannah said. Exactly that, and I can't take it. I

start crying again, and I feel Lucy hug me. It's strange – a 36 year old man being comforted by an eleven year old girl who's taller than he is. But she's also a lifelong friend, and ... Hannah's favorite aunt.

"It's hard being twelve," I say at last. "All this crying."

"Yer a reg'lar fountain o' tears," she says with some sort of Gaelic accent. I'm probably meant to recognize it, but it doesn't matter. I give her a hug and let her go, wipe some snot and tears off on a nearby birch. I guess twelve year olds don't have handkerchiefs. "We all are. Just don't talk about it, or Bettina Boholt will make fun of you at lunch."

"When did you get so wise?" I ask. "Were you always like this?"

She rolls her eyes, then turns serious again, and leads the way to our log. "I mean it, though. Why did your wife want a divorce. And don't get all weepy on me again." She brushes a damp shoulder ostentatiously.

We sit straddling the log, feet not far from the clear water below.

"I don't —"

"And don't tell me you don't know."

"You're bossy for an eleven year old."

"Whatever. Think about it."

"I don't — " But I can see her jaw set. It's not as intimidating as it is when she's older, when she's got a fight lined up with some city planner, but it works. "I guess... I guess I just..." It's hard to be objective about yourself, hard to put into words. "There's nothing special." I can see Lucy start to shake her head, and I realise where Hannah got it from. It's the same squint, tilt, skew of the jaw. "I'm nothing special, I mean. In 2019, I mean. I'm an accountant. How boring can you get?" I used to say that as a joke, and my wife Alison

always laughed along. ‘We’re the ultimate party couple,’ we used to say. ‘An accountant and a lawyer. Of course we’re fun.’ Now, though, I wonder.

“I was just average, I guess. Average guy, average job, average looks. Why wouldn’t she leave me?” There’s a bitterness to the comment that I can’t quite repress. It’s true, though. I guess most people face that ‘what happened to my dreams?’ moment in middle age. I get to have it when I’m not even a teenager.

“Well, was *she* above average?” Has she always had that way of cutting straight to the bones of the thing, of seeing what it’s made up of?

“That’s why you’re an architect, isn’t it?”

“What? I’m an architect?”

“Um, yeah. For ten years or so. Maybe more.” Should I have told her? What if it changes things?

“So?”

“So what?”

“Your wife. Alison. Was she above average.”

She’s got a knack for the hard questions. And an ability to focus. “I think so. I mean, I married her, and all. She’s good looking. She’s smart. Works hard.”

“What a catch.” Kids are really good at sarcasm. I remember that.

“No, I mean really. I... I don’t deserve her. She loves Hannah. She volunteers at an animal shelter. She’s vegan. She wants to make the world a better place.” The more I talk about it, the more I miss her. “I guess I’m just not part of it.”

“Not *more* crying.”

“No. Promise. I’ve got myself under control.” Mostly. “It’s just... Now I have to go through it all again.”

She thinks about that for a while. Peels a piece of bark off

the log and drops it into the stream to watch it float away. It gets trapped by a stone for a moment before a stray current whirls it to the left, past the obstruction. “Why?”

“Why what?” I’m still watching the bark. It keeps getting caught up. Sometimes it goes left, sometimes right, depending on the ripples.

“Why do you have to go through it again?”

I give her my best ‘what’s wrong with you?’ look. “Let’s see... I’m twelve. Again. I have to go through middle school. Again. And high school. And college. And all the rest. And then I get divorced.”

“Why?”

“Because that’s... That’s what *happens*. That’s what happened last time. That’s what’ll happen this time.”

“Don’t let it.”

“Time is fixed. That’s what all the stories say. You can’t kill Hitler. Or if you do, it doesn’t make a difference. It’s all the same in the end.”

She’s read the same stories I have. At least some of them. “Did Heinlein live through a time loop? You think his Unmarried Mother story was really a true confession? He *made it up*, Matt. So did the rest of them.”

That’s... true. I’m pretty certain none of my favorite writers was really a time traveler. Of course, I am, so who knows?

“Matt, why not try? You love Alison – I don’t know why – and Hannah. You want to keep them. Try to.”

“How?”

“I’m not the one that knows the future.”

“Yeah.”

“You said you’re average. Be better. Be above average. Be from Lake Wobegon.”

I chuckle. I hate that show, but her parents listen to it. Alison did too. Will. Will listen to it, on the radio, in podcasts, with me next to her, reading a book, playing with Hannah. Being happy. Not being divorced. I can see it now — Alison and me, on a porch in our old age. Reading an e-mail from our above-average child, who's now in the Senate, or on a space station, or fighting corruption in Turkmenistan, or something. A child whose parents *aren't* divorced. Just like mine aren't, just like Lucy's aren't.

“You're a smart girl, Lucy.” It feels odd to say ‘girl’, but that's what she is, just like I'm physically a boy.

“No, really?”

I look around at the fresh green of spring, and this time I see the obvious. It's a new year. Not the same year. The same tree, but growing new leaves, different ones. Maybe this year, that branch will grow taller, that leaf will flourish, will make it above the dark canopy to thrive through summer. If it can, I can, and I've got a head start.

“This time around, I'm going to do that studying thing.”

“The one where you actually open the textbook?”

“That's the one. Good grades, hard work, good college, all of it.”

“Uh huh.” But with a friendly tone.

“What's more, I'm going to do it with money. We both are. Google, Facebook, Tesla, Amazon. Remember those names. Invest in them.”

“Matt.” She's rolling her eyes again.

“What?” This is incredibly valuable investment advice.

“I'm eleven.”

“Oh. Well, next year, maybe.” I wink, reach out and squeeze her shoulder, and get up to balance on the log. “Right now, though, I hear the Hoeffners have a new puppy we could

go play with.”

“What?” She’s scrambling to her feet. “And you wasted all morning on this divorce stuff?”

I take off running for the Hoeffner’s place. Tomorrow, I’ll start studying. Today, I’m still twelve.

chapter eleven

Elizabeth Mead

MARCH 2005

Why do these interviews always come at the wrong time? This is NOT where I want to be right now, but here I am – stuck and locked into this session. And why can't they crank up the heat just a tad in this green room? Chicago in March is ugly enough, but do they have to keep the room temp the same as outside???

And what was I thinking when I put on this navy suit? Way too formal for a twenty-two year old writer. But, if I ditch the tie, maybe I can pull this off.... Too bad I shaved; scruffy would look passable... except, I keep forgetting, not much to shave yet. Must remember to sound like a twenty-two year old. Must not get into predicting. But, this guy, Jason, the moderator is from New Orleans. Katrina is coming this August...

No... I can't go there. The last thing I want to do is start rumors flying. "Young savant predicts disasters." No, that will just start the circus. Better to just close my eyes and keep my

head down. Don't even hint.

I need to grind out this interview and then I'm out of here. Keep it together and play it safe.

Keep reminding myself to act twenty-two -- be present -- be in the NOW... Christ... what garbage. I thought I'd come to grips with all of this. But it's all still there with me. Why? Why?

Take a breath. Okay. Come off as natural; no notes. Keep answers light and short. Look at the host, not the camera; keep it light.... keep it light.... Who am I kidding? My host, at twenty-eight, is younger than I am. I got this.

"Good morning, Jason. Yes. So glad you are having me on your show. Really excited to talk to you..."

"We're here with Mathew Green, the new young novelist phenom. Mathew -- how have you found the time to write three best selling books and you are just out of college? I've never seen anything or anyone quite like you?"

"Well, um, I guess you just make the time when you have something to write. And you, know, school just agreed with me and was pretty easy. I just used my time to plow through what needed doing. I saw a lot of my friends get overwhelmed by school because they didn't know what they wanted out of it. I guess you could say I was just ready for all of it.

"I mean, we're both Millenials, you and I... you're just a few years older than I am, Jason, and look at what you're doing. You're hosting your own show. I could say that you're pretty much of an phenom too, 'ya know?"

Jason thinks he really likes this guest...

"Millenials -- people are starting to use that term a lot to describe our generation. Do you think our generation is any different than previous ones?"

"Yes, Jason, I think we're very different. And we're not a

homogenous group. We're probably the first generation in a long time that will have significant polarization within our generation."

"What do you mean, Mathew?"

"Well... some of us, like you and me, are already blazing away and serious about our jobs and our future. And a whole bunch of our age group is still stumbling along wondering why they have to grow up and go to work in the first place. They still want to hang out at home and play video games. I just heard about a movie that is coming out next year called Failure to Launch."

"All three of your books speak about events that are pretty believable. A few of the events in your first book have, in fact, happened. Are you like some mystic with the ability to see into the future?"

Okay, careful here... dial it back here... laugh it off, and sound as surprised as he is about how close your book parallels what happened after it was published.

"Wow, Jason, you know, when you have a couple of coincidences it really makes you seem like a fortune teller, doesn't it? I mean, it's not hard to predict a few maniacs shooting up a place after seeing movie after movie showing just that same thing, right?"

"Well, tell us how you zero in on your stories and how you are able to construct such believable future worlds in your books."

"Um, well, when I was growing up, everyone kept telling me I had a vivid imagination. But, well, you know, I was pretty keen at playing SimCity and, I just liked to see how things played out when I tweaked different aspects of my different worlds. And I guess I just take things a little further in my books."

“So your new book, *The End of Democracy*, is about a United States whose citizens seem to be at war with each other and it’s pretty much civil war, with different states lining up against other states and very little federal authority. Is this a political commentary?”

“Well, I guess maybe so. But I remember how ugly things seemed after the 2000 election and different people in my school were talking about THAT was going to cause a civil war. And there was so much turmoil. But then, we had September 11th and everyone came together – at least for a while. And it all just seems to me like the politics is big business for politicians but we are so much worse off by getting involved and invested.”

“But you are painting a pretty grim story of things going really wrong here in the states. Don’t you think that might scare people?”

“Jason, do you remember that old movie, *Planet of the Apes*? And the ending, when the main character realises that he’s been on earth – and he was in what had been the United States all along? That we screwed it all up ourselves? This is just about the same thing, really.”

“Gee, Jason, don’t you think we take a lot for granted here? One of my minors during college was history. You know, there was a guy from Spain, Santayana, who said, ‘Those who do not learn from history are doomed to repeat it.’ And I keep thinking that we aren’t so good at learning from our mistakes, so....”

“Mathew, how did you get so serious at only twenty two?”

“When I was a kid, there was always that one guy who yelled “Do Over” every time he made a mistake. Everyone always gave him a real hard time but I always thought, “Why not? Go ahead and have your do-over... I mean, what does

any of it matter when you're a kid?

“So, in *End of Democracy* we see all these people who want continual do-overs because they don't like the way an election goes. And, even when they go through the courts and it's absolutely proven that the results were correct, they still keep that mantra going of a stolen election. Just like after the 2000 election. And, after every other election, there is always this big push to delegitimise the results. And people are so convinced that their way is the only way that you see that some groups will do anything to make sure they win an election and you have a giant increase in election fraud, and people begin to voting for personalities when they THINK they are voting for issues.”

“So, I don't want to have a spoiler alert here, but what about happy endings. You don't seem to believe in those. Why is that?”

“Jason – even when you have second chances to correct the mistakes you make, I am not sure you make the right choices. We can only hope we are making the right choices, but you don't know what other factors are in play.”

“Okay. So, why is the main character in each of your books an accountant? Was that, perhaps a missed calling for you?”

“No, not really. I mean, accounting makes a lot of sense as a discipline. Numbers are constant. One plus one will always equal two. Numbers don't make mistakes. That's been the same since the beginning of time. You can add in fancy algorithms, or algebraic equations, or calculus and you can do a lot of extrapolations, but when it comes down to the bottom line, you get the same sum time after time.”

“So – you can stand the world on its head, blow up entire countries, wipe an entire generation off the face of the world – numbers will always stay the same. And there will always be a

function for an accountant. The job might go by a different name – but there will always be the need for counting things. One and one is always going to equal two. ”

“You’ve put on your bio that you are an internet investor, not a writer. Why is that?”

“Well, uh, I like writing and it IS my profession, and I am having a lot of success right now. But there are a lot of starving and unsuccessful writers out there. And, well, I don’t really know how long my books are going to sell. I mean, it is really a rush to see a book of yours in print. But what I want to do is insulate myself and provide a hedge for a comfortable future. And, I don’t know... I think that investing in a few internet stocks just seems like a good idea right now...”

Easy there – don’t get ahead of yourself. It’s not going to take rocket science to predict the FANG growths, but everyone still has to get through the 2008 implosion.

“Changing the subject, Mathew, you just now heard that your first book, *Missed Call*, is being optioned for a motion picture. That’s got to make you feel like your future is pretty well set right there. It seems like you are hitting it out of the ball park, right? Twenty-two years old with three published books and a movie to boot???”

“Yeah, well, I’m pretty lucky. And I need to keep reminding myself that this is good now. Really good. But, you know, we don’t know what is going to happen tomorrow, or next week, or in six months that could change everything. I’ll be the Kanter Fitzgerald bankers that went to work in the World Trade Center on September 11th thought they had everything set perfectly too. So, I just try to keep my head down and manoeuvre around any potholes. You know?”

“So, you’re twenty-two. And you paint a pretty bleak future for people. What do you feel is in your future? Marriage?

Kids?”

“Um, yeah, well... my parents have a great marriage. They’ve kept their vows and their promises to each other. And that’s really solid. But I don’t think most people see marriage like that any longer. That whole inviolability of a vow doesn’t really hold people. We’ve become experts at disposability. And eventually that is going to just choke us. And, well, it’s got to be really shitty when somebody thinks you/re just not worth the effort any more. I don’t want to go through that again.

Shit! Change the subject, danger zone!

“I mean, like I’ve seen some of my friends in college get dumped really viciously and, man! I don’t want to go through that. So I think, that, for now, I will just wait to see what happens.”

“I have to say, Mathew, you are one cautious young man. And I think that people will look forward to your future interviews and future books. Thank you for joining me.

And, okay, we can cut there.”

Jason reaches out to shake Mathew’s hand and asks him if he’d like to join him for lunch across the street.

“Would really like to stay and talk some more, and will definitely take a rain check, but actually, I really need to catch a cab right now. It’s been really a great interview. Thanks for being so generous. Bye.”

And, home free now. So grab my backpack and let me get the heck out of Dodge!

chapter twelve

Noé Ramalleira Fernández

WE TALKED ABOUT TODAY when we came home from Alison's tenth year reunion. She was feeling wistful that night, I guess.

"That was your glory day, do you know that?"

"What, because I met you? I mean, granted, that was very important in our lives, for sure."

"I don't mean that, Matt. I mean you were at your peak, the most charming, the most charismatic you've ever been. Like, you're not charismatic at all, but that night you were dancing with everybody, and laughing. You'd move from group to group making jokes and then going to the next, like spreading the joy around."

"I don't remember any of that, Ali."

"No, of course you don't. I saw you before you saw me; you went to the kitchen to get a beer and you found Forde there — I didn't know it was Forde at the time, right? — and you left him laughing at the kitchen and moved on to whoever it was that was manning the iPod and whispered something to his ear, and a bit after that 'Seven Nation Army' started playing and you told everybody that was in the couch to get up and

dance on the chorus, and, like, I get that you didn't realise you were in the center of it, but I had been watching you for maybe 10 minutes straight when you first came by and talked to me, Matt. You were just hypnotic; so happy and so... in the moment, so alive, you know."

"I don't know what to say, Ali. I don't think that's really what it was like."

"Yeah, no, but it was. I remember thinking, after one of our first dates, and of course they didn't go that well, I remember coming back to my dorm and thinking if I have to give him another chance, he's got it in him to be much better than he has been today."

"After one of our first dates, already?"

"You were not as great as I was hoping for, you know. You looked like you'd be so fun, just like a bolt of... And you were alright, of course, and there was a spark there, but without that day at the party, and like, the promise of it, I don't know that I would... It kept me going, is what I mean. It eventually rubbed off, of course"

When I was coming in through the threshold I heard steps behind me, so I held the door open. This voice came from behind, saying "thanks, man", and I suddenly realised that going to the party had been an awful idea. I turned around and saw Scott Cliff. He was looking for a place out of the way where he could leave his helmet. So he already had the motorbike.

Memory is amazing, I wouldn't have thought in a million years that I would recognise Scott Cliff's voice. I never knew him that much when he was alive.

I went to the kitchen to grab something to eat, mainly because I was shaking and I needed to hold something in my

hands. I asked this girl who was leaning on the fridge door if she could let me open it. She was a bit drunk, or maybe stoned, and she started moving morosely, but then stopped and stared at me. Her glance turned focused, suddenly intense, as if she knew me.

It's not the first time I've had that feeling. *Déjà vu* doesn't bother me these days, because I can easily shrug it off by thinking that there's always a chance that I'm actually reliving my life, but, as a trade-off, every now and again, someone looks at me intently, and I can't help but feel that they might be recognising me.

The problem this time was I really did remember her. She was Danielle Wright, a friend of JJ's. She was a year younger than me, her dad was a dentist in Gary. He had an uncle down in New Orleans that was going to lose his house in the Katrina in a couple of months, and end up living with them in Indiana.

"I'm sorry. It's just that... You look a lot like Matthew Green, you know that?"

"I am Matt Green," I said, before I caught myself. I coughed a bit. "Do we know each other?"

"Oh, no, no, I'm so sorry. My name is Dani, and I'm such a huge fan. I've read 'Missed Call' hundreds of times, I love it, especially the- with the dolphins... Man, I can believe you're here!"

"Oh, thank you, Dani, that means a lot, thanks." She did love reading, I had forgotten that. She was actually quite a good writer, but she was going to stop doing it after taking over her father's practice.

"No, but actually, what are you doing here? Who are you with?"

"I'm with this friend." All of a sudden, I remembered I hadn't seen Alison yet. "Listen, I don't want to blow you off,

but...’

“Oh, OK”

“No, I mean... I’m sorr- Listen, do you want an autograph, maybe? Let me see, I always carry a sharpie, give me your cup”

“Yeah, yeah, sure, whatever.”

“I’m sorry, I’m really not in the mood for talking right now about my books”, I mumbled. “I have just seen someone, I’m a bit rattled, and also I have to look for-”

“Yeah, OK, man, no problem.” She started walking away, visibly disappointed. She raised her red cup. “Thanks for the autograph, anyway.”

I went into the main room and scanned through the crowd to find Alison. I couldn’t find her, and the crowd seemed to be dispersing. There were a bunch of guys, Forde and some of his friends, who were daring each other to go jump in the pool, and on the other side of the room another group was going to pop up outside to check out Scott’s new bike.

I didn’t remember any of that happening. I felt it wasn’t supposed to. The first time around weíd all stayed in the same room, I think, in a way that everybody, even those like Alison who didn’t party, were included in the fun. She had been in a corner, just sitting and sort of calmly controlling everything that went down. That had been what first attracted me to her. I had gone over to her because she’d looked like a queen, or like an oracle. So composed, so elegant, so much a part of everything and yet sort of above it all. We talked a bit and I realised she did really want to mix with everybody, and dance and just let go, so I went and talk to my friend Brian, and told him to play “Take me out” by Franz Ferdinand, and took her to the center of the room and danced with her and jumped around.

I kept looking at the same corner where she was supposed

to be, but she wasn't. The room was emptying, fast.

"What's even going on?" I asked aloud.

"We're going outside, they're gonna jump in the pool!", someone answered. I didn't recognise her, but I did remember her boyfriend. He would end up having a small company that I kept the books for, for a couple of years.

"But it's freezing outside!"

"Well, duh. That's the whole point. The water is not frozen, somehow. I bet you it superfrees as soon as the first guy jumps in."

Her boyfriend interrupted her. "Well, actually, that's not how that works."

"Yeah, but imagine if it did." They went out, but I suddenly saw Alison, coming out of the bathroom. She looked around, surprised. "Where is everybody?" she asked.

"They're all outside, Forde and his friends are going to jump in the pool." I answered. I thought about introducing myself, but she wasn't really looking at me.

"What? That's so random, why?"

"Just 'cause, I guess"

"Sounds like fun". She started walking towards the door. "Aren't you coming?"

"I... My name is Matt Green, by the way."

"Like the writer? Oh, shit, sorry, you are him. I saw Dani Wright and she told me she'd been talking to a writer, but I was imagining, like, an old guy, like a divorced guy in his forties, ogling at young girls."

"Whoa, there."

"I'm sorry," Ali smiled. I had forgotten her smile; memory is amazing.

"It's been a weird evening, tell her I'm really sorry."

"Ah, don't worry, she'll be alright. So, first things first, I'm

Alison. And now that we know each other, are you coming with me or what? We're missing all the fun."

"Yeah, sure"

"So you're friends with Forde, right? That's why you're here?"

"I mean, who doesn't know him, right?"

"Yeah!" she yelled, just a tad too enthusiastically. I felt a sudden pang of anxiety. Did she... did she like him?

"Anyway, why aren't you jumping inside then, with all the rest of them?"

"I... am not dressed appropriately"

"I mean, that's for sure, you look like a banker or something, who told you to come here in a suit?"

"I'm dressed like a divorced forty-something who goes to a party to ogle at girls, ain't I?"

"Don't be hard on yourself, you don't look bad in it. I don't know why your wife left you, to be honest. Anyway, I'm already freezing just by being here outside in a corner of the party, so I might as well just jump in," she said.

And I should have followed her. I should have been the one to tell her to jump in, actually. But I hadn't, and I didn't. I stayed in the border of the pool, while a bunch of young kids at their peak splashed and spread their joy around. They were hypnotic, Alison was right. They lived in the moment. I didn't feel capable of that anymore.

I think Alison left with Forde, at the end of the night. I left alone. Scott Cliff sped away in his bike, and I lost sight of him in the darkness.

chapter thirteen

Claire Woodier

MY BREATHING IS *DEAFENING*. How hard must I look like I'm concentrating on this packet of.. what? Skittles? Jesus. Not exactly a tough consumer choice. Put. The candy. Down. Act *natural* for fuck's sake. Shit shit shit she's coming this way. Smile! NOT THAT MUCH! Holy fuck I am so bad at this. Okay, she smiled back. That's good! STOP GRINNING AT HER. Put something in your basket. Do something practical. You're supposed to be shopping.. shop Matt shop! Okay, so what would I need if I lived near her and was popping in? Milk? Cereal, coffee? She's leaving? Christ. GET TO THE COUNTER. Stop breathing so hard dammit. She's gonna run a mile; okay she's smiling; at me?

"Hi" I chuckle bashfully. *She's looking in my basket. She's got a sort-of-a smile on her face. What is that?*

"Hello." *Thats a wry smile. She thinks I'm pathetic. In a 'he's-attractive' way or a 'what-a-twat' kind of a way?* "Thats a very eclectic basket." She comments as she pays for her six-pack. I look down. Skittles, Milk and drain cleaner. Drain cleaner JESUS. Must've picked that up in the panic. Now she thinks

I've got blockages. Nice.

"Yeah, I'm, oh." She's gone.

Yep.

Twat.

"I'll take a Schlitz please." She's just cast one eye my way. She's been drinking that since forever; After and before. She's listening now. "COME on Wheldon". I utter, not too loudly. I think we're the only ones in the bar watching the race. Its a miracle they get the channel. Took some legwork finding somewhere to watch IndyCar in Chicago, but I knew she'd be here if I found it. Its her birthday soon and that ridiculous race makes her feel closer to home. She's squinting at the screen now, she's always had perfect eyesight.. she's trying to remember where she's seen me before.

"He'll do it." She said, taking that big man-sized gulp of beer. Just as she always did. She could drink a bottle of beer in three swigs flat.

"You think?" I smiled. He did do it. I should remember to start betting. Just another 'coincidence', like the one putting me and her in the same place at the same time; a contrived and contemptible 'meet-cute'. I am a Twat. She *did* marry me eventually though. It's not like I'm forcing her into anything she wan't going to do anyway. I'm just pressing fast-forward.. or is it rewind? Who the fuck knows. I'm here, she's her.. what? Where did she go?

"The Indy girl? Just left." The bartender motioned to the door.

"Shit. Did I say that out loud?"

"Yep." He let one eye look at me. "You might want to try playing a *little* bit more hard to get." My confused look asked him to elaborate. "Just turn the excited puppy dial down a

couple of notches.” He continued to wipe down the mahogany. ‘It’s embarrassing.”

“Hello?” Alison peered around her door.

“Hi!” *You’re grinning like an insane person. Stop it.* “I mean, hello.”

“Do I know you?”

“I’m erm, Matt..”

“You’re THAT guy! I keep bumping into you!” She pushed the door open and stepped into it, smiling. “Do you study here too?”

“Erm, no.” *God I hope I’m coming off as cute.* “I came to see you. Because well, I wanted to see if you wanted to, maybe go out sometime. Tonight! Maybe?”

“You came to see me?” She was still smiling, shaking her head in confusion, but amused. “Did you follow me here?”

“Not exactly.”

“Who is it Al?” Came a voice from inside.

“No-one!” She shouted back.

Hey! I thought. No-one?

“You didn’t follow me?” She shifted her weight and folded her arms while she was processing the situation. “*Then how did you know I was here?*”

My mouth dried out suddenly. “Erm..”

“WHO is it?” Shouted the voice from inside.

“It’s NO-one John.” She replied, not taking her eyes from mine. She wasn’t smiling any more. “You need to go now.” She commanded it, with her low and quiet voice. She always said that was the more effective way to make yourself heard. Much better than shouting she would say. She pushed the door towards me. Without thinking I stuck my foot in it’s way.

“Don’t shut me out.” I whispered, frightened of the words.

“What are you doing?” Alison cried, breaking her own rules. I had panicked her.

“I’m sorry I didn’t mean to frighten you.” I blurted out. “I would never do that.”

“What?” She was struggling with the door. “Get out! JOHN!”

I had no time left. I had to tell her.

“I just wanted to see you - to make a, um, connection with you? Oh goddammit.. YOU’RE MY WIFE FOR FUCK’S SAKE!”

Alison was still struggling with the door. “You’re out of your mind!” She blasted, still battling. I could hear footsteps coming towards us from within.

“I know it sounds crazy but we *were* married! Well, we *are* married-we *will be* married.. in the future.. your future.”

“What?! Shut up!”

“What’s going on here Al?” A man in his sweats stood behind her, scratching his belly,

“This guy is leaving John.” She spat, emboldened by her reinforcements.

“Hi John.” I waved,

“Hi.” He shook my hand.

“Stop it!” Alison spat.

“I mean, honestly, who IS this?” I asked, the husband in me kicking in.

“What the fucking hell has it got to do with you?” She cried.

“I mean... this guy? Are you SLEEPING with him?. He doesn’t even LOOK like me!”

“ARE YOU FUCKING DERANGED?”

“Hey!” Muttered John, insulted.

“What?” Alison looked at him. “Oh for goodness sake I

didn't mean..(she gave up) oh crap John SHUT UP!"

"Okay look." I said. "You are destined to be my wife. I have somehow managed to get myself transported back in time and I have a second chance at everything, but I don't want to do this again without you. You are THE person I want to spend EVERY life with. Not just the last one, but the next one. And the one after that."

Everyone was silent and breathless. Me with adrenalin, Alison from the door fight. Not sure why John was... maybe asthma? She was staring at me, I was staring at her. John couldn't figure out who to look at. "You know he seems sincere.."

"SHUT UP JOHN!" Alison snapped. "Go and call the police." John shrugged, and apologised to me with his eyes. "If you," She was pointing at me now, "do not leave this property in the next 47 seconds, I will get the cops to have a restraining order slapped on you quicker than I can down a bottle of beer."

"Three swigs.." John and I chorussed. Alison looked like she'd been bitten. "How did you?"

"How did I know that? Many years of marriage. You also secretly eat jelly from the jar with a spoon at night, and have a recurring weird long white hair that grows out the middle of your forehead." John winced and nodded in acknowledgement. Alison turned to him open-mouthed in disbelief.

"Call the police John, thats fine, I'm going. But we WILL be married Alison Broadley. It's done. Its already happened. You can bet your bottom dollar on it." And with that I walked away, wondering if I could find a bookie that would let me.

chapter fourteen

Julia Ward

A TYPICAL SPRING FLURRY began as I hurried across the quad toward the university cafe.

The door was nearly wrenched from my hand as a sudden gust of wind tried to push it closed again. Once inside, rubbing my hands together, I scanned the room as I breathed in the familiar scent of the coffee shop. So many years spent in this place. Waiting.

This time I was waiting for Lucy.

Lucy would be late. She was always late.

But Alison might be there with her friends.

My gorgeous Alison.

God, how I missed her.

I will make this happen.

And I had an idea how.

Lucy had always been my sounding board. She would help me.

I ordered black coffee for me and an extra hot vanilla latte for Lucy. It should be drinkable by the time she got there.

As I walked through, looking for a table, my gaze fell to

Alison's favourite spot. Funny how after all these years, and all the added intervening years, that habit still held sway.

There was no sign of Alison however. Through the window, I caught sight of a few blondes hurrying cautiously from one building to another as the flurry turned to rain, but none of them was Alison. Hell, who knew what her hair would look like anyway. It could be cranberry red and bobbed short for all I knew.

"What are you looking at?" Lucy huffed as she slid into the chair next to me. "Is this mine?" She grabbed her hot drink without waiting for an answer, warming her bare hands with a sigh. "Thanks. So what's the big emergency?"

"Luce..." Turning to her, I offered her the most sincere look I could muster. "I need to do it right this time. I need to get her to marry me again so I can get her to stay. And I think I know how."

"Oh, for Pete's sake, Matt." Shaking her head, she leaned back in her chair, staring at her drink. "Get over it. She left you." Sitting forward, she propped her elbows on the table, her brown eyes spearing mine. "Let. It. Go. Move on."

"But she married me, Luce. She loved me, right? I mean, you don't marry someone you don't love. She *loved* me. I know she did. We were happy. And I want her back. And I know how to make it stick this time." I was almost giddy, heady with the brilliance of my plan.

But Lucy wasn't listening. "Matty, look out that window. How many women do you see out there? How many?"

"I don't know." I didn't look out the window. While I wanted to see Alison, I didn't want to see her with John Fucking Forde.

"Dozens, Matt. I mean, hell. Look at *me*. I'm available." She wiggled her eyebrows at me, her lips curved in a half smile.

“Come on.” Laughing, I spread my hands. “You? Stop joking around.”

Had a dark look crossed her face? If it had, it was gone as fast as it came. “Fine,” she said. “Not me. But look around. There are dozens of eligible women. Ones who won’t leave you in fourteen years. Ones who’ll appreciate a man who’s had two best sellers by the age of twenty-two. And another one on the way.”

“I can do better. I can offer more.” My drive was fuelled by a roaring intensity inside me.

But Lucy cut me off, her eyebrows arched. “Matthew. Listen to me.” She gathered my hands in hers. “You have a chance to do it all over, Matty. Isn’t there anything you wish you’d done differently? I mean, yeah, Alison is pretty, relatively smart, athletic. But she left you.”

“She left me because...”

“Matt, the reason won’t change. Who knows how long she’d wanted to leave. Maybe she’d only stuck around because she felt sorry for you.”

“Nice, Luce. Thanks for that vote of confidence.” Best friend or not, that was a low blow. I stood, but her hands held mine, tugging me back down.

“We’ve been through a lot together, Matty. By your experience, we’ve done it twice. You deserve better, Matt. You deserve a woman who’ll love you just as you are. One who won’t leave you after fourteen years because... because... Why did she leave?”

With a shrug, I put off the answer, unwilling to say the words aloud or admit them to myself. Or let Lucy know how right she might be.

“Well, the thing is... Look at our parents. Both sets are still together. That’s love, Matt. Sticking it out through thick and

thin. If Alison wanted to, she'd have stayed."

"That's what I want to talk to you about."

When she pulled her hands away, she slapped them on the table. "Would you listen to me? You need to stop this. We're friends because we can be honest with each other. Well, I'm being honest with you. Chasing after her again is setting you up for another smack down. Even if you get her to stay longer than fourteen years this time, she's still going to leave."

Feeling sick, I swallowed. Fighting a rising gorge and trying to calm shaking hands, I grabbed my cup and managed a drink of coffee without spilling. My eyes burned.

"Matt." Lucy's hand covered mine as she almost whispers my name. "I'm sorry, but you can't deny that it's likely."

"I have to, Luce." I fought the tears. "I have to because..."

Lucy started to argue, but I stopped her. "Luce, don't say anything. Just... Just let me... Hannah, Lucy."

"You know, you can still have kids with someone else. This time around with someone who'll stay with you."

Adamant to be heard, I growled. "Hannah is my light. She's my little ray of golden sunshine, Lucy. Until I felt my baby girl's fist wrap around my finger, I had no idea what love was." With my sleeve, I swiped away tears, pretending I was rubbing my forehead. "It's not just about Alison, Luce. It's about my family. My wife *and* my little girl."

Lucy was quiet as she held my hand.

Finally, she let go and leaned back. "Fine. Tell me your idea."

There was only one sure way to get my wife to stay. "I'm gonna get rich."

Lucy rolled her eyes so hard, I thought they were going to spin all the way around. "Seriously, Matty? How is this different from, I don't know, you're whole life plan for as long

as I've known you? Besides, you're a two time best-seller. You *are* rich, aren't you?"

"Modestly rich. But I don't think it's enough. I mean, I've made some good money, and have had a lot of women hitting on me. So that had to be what was missing right? I did okay as an accountant, but if I'd made more... If I make more now, I'll be able to take her all over the world. Hell, we'll be able to give Hannah the best education by travelling." Leaning forward, I lower my tone so only Lucy can hear me. "I know things, Luce. I'll be able to make a bundle." My face hurts, I'm smiling so big. "She won't leave me if I'm filthy stinking rich. Why would she? I'll be able to give her anything and everything she wants."

Silent, Lucy stared at me, her face a myriad of different expressions before she shook her head. "Fine. What's your plan?"

Grinning, I squeezed her hand. Good ol' Lucy never would let me down. "You remember when you made me watch that dumb chick flick where the girl and the guy are getting a divorce and she faints and ends up back in time to her senior year?"

Scrunching up her face in thought, Lucy shook her head.

"Come on, you have to. I think it was like your mom's favourite or something."

"Peggy Sue got Married?"

I thought a moment before nodding my head vigorously. "Yes! That's it. Well at one point, she invents pantyhose and tells people to invest in Xerox. That's what I'm going to do, Luce! I'm going to invest! I'll make millions. Hell, billions!" I had to stifle my own excitement as people scowled at me interrupting their zen conversations over lattes.

With a snort, Lucy slapped the table. "Really? I think it's a

little late to invest in Xerox, Matt.”

“Not Xerox exactly. But all the companies that *will* start or go public, a myriad of little startups. Or the ones that will simply grow over the next few years. Facebook, Amazon, Walmart, Disney. I’ll be able to amass a fortune because I know things, Luce.”

Chewing the inside of her cheek, Lucy’s thinking face was anything but attractive. But she *was* thinking.

Before she could unthink, I needed to reel her in. “I can make some suggestions to you too. If you want.”

This time, I know I saw a dark look.

I wondered why, but not for long. There were too many things to put into motion. “I’ll need seed money. A lot of seed money. All the things I’ve bought with the advances and royalties—the house, the cars—I need to sell them all. Maybe you know someone at that architect firm? Will you help me, Lucy? If not for me, for my daughter?”

With a sigh, she sat back in her chair.

She was going to help me. And I was on top of the world.

chapter fifteen

Heather Lovelace-Gilpin

MAY 2019

“What are you staring at?”

I watched her stroll across the restaurant after the hostess, flashing a smile when she motioned towards the table. She placed a menu in front of her, her lips moved to answer the same question they ask every customer before she walks off.

“Can I bring you something to drink?”

Are they given special training on how to be bubbly and energetic when they ask such a question or do employers have a reference manual on how to scout out personalities that will fit with this kind of job description? Thinking back to the many restaurants I’ve frequented, the hostesses are all the same. All smiles, bright eyes, dazzling personalities. Not all, I have to say I’ve had my fair share of rude restaurant staff.

Lucy turned around in her seat. When it registered who had just walked in, her head snapped back.

“Shit. You want to leave?”

“Why?”

Her expression answered the question sitting between us

and I shook my head.

“The restraining order was lifted five years ago.”

I sipped my drink, telling myself to look away. Not exactly my shining moment.

And now I want to talk to her. Say hello, maybe apologize for what transpired between us. We have history together. My wife, the mother of my daughter. Even if she doesn't remember it. Or it never happened. Can't say I understand it myself.

I set my napkin down next to my plate and pushed my chair back.

“What are you doing?”

“I'm going to say hello.”

Lucy's eyes widened.

“Sit your ass down.” She turned to look at her again.

Alison is reading over the menu, biting the nail on her first finger.

I buttoned up my suit jacket, straightening out my sleeves.

“I will be right back.”

I didn't wait for her words of advice, hearing her soft groan before muttering “idiot.” I took a deep breath and walked the short distance to her table.

“Hello, Alison.”

She lifted her head and there's her pretty blue eyes. Eyes I have spent years trying to read, but could never quite figure out. I blamed her profession, lawyers are supposed to be hard to read. Makes it hard for opposing counsel to know what tricks she has up her sleeves. I told her once she would make a great poker player.

She cocked her head to the side before giving me a small smile.

“Do I know you?” She asked, her voice soft like silk.

Are you fucking kidding me?

“Matt Green.” I cleared my throat when my voice came out husky.

And now she remembers. Eyes darting around, the look of sheer panic before straightening up in her chair, her lips forming into a straight line. I took three steps away from her.

“I mean you no harm. I’m having lunch with Lucy.” I pointed towards the table and there’s Lucy, watching us like a hawk. “I saw you walk in and wanted to say hello.” I gave her a quick nod and my forced smile. “I didn’t mean to disturb you. Just like I didn’t mean to freak you out back then...”

I sighed. Lucy’s right. I am an idiot.

“Enjoy your meal.”

I spun around on my heels. Lucy’s eyebrows shot up when I returned to my chair. And yeah, I’m desperately trying not to drop my head onto the table and slam it down a couple of times.

“Well?”

“Scared the shit out of her.” I mumbled, grabbing the drink menu, my eyes perusing it, but not really reading the words. It’s more of a distraction. Something to curb the embarrassment. “Pretty sure she’s hightailing it towards the door right now.”

“Actually, she’s ordering.”

“What?”

I fought the temptation for a good two seconds before scratching my chin on my right shoulder. She is ordering, and she doesn’t look freaked out. And she should. Especially after what I did. Hell, she even glanced our way before dropping her eyes to read something she placed in front of her.

Our meals arrived, Lucy and I chatted about everyday things. It’s hard not to talk about it. My previous life Alison

was a part of, along with Hannah. When I try to figure out where things went wrong. Why she wanted a divorce when she had everything a woman could ever want. The big house, the cars, the money. Which usually ends with Lucy telling me to fucking drop it already.

“Working on a new book?”

“A couple of ideas are floating around. Nothing concrete. What about you?”

She started in on her latest project, rattling off schematics, using fancy architectural words, telling me about the latest screw ups which is putting the entire project off track. Eventually, the conversation shifted to reminiscing growing up, laughing at the stupid shit we did. Not everyone can say they lived their life twice. Well, she didn't. I did.

I glanced around for the waitress to see if I could get a refill on my drink, but seems they're taking a break. I suppose the perky, helpful personality type is only required for the hostess since our waitress hasn't really done much.

Once our meals are polished, plates taken away, Lucy and I argued over who's paying the bill. Which I always seem to win since she can never pull her wallet out fast enough. I set my black AMEX card down onto the table, figuring it will be another ten, fifteen minutes before the waitress makes her way over.

“Matt?”

I lifted my head from the sound of her voice and quickly stood to my feet.

“It was nice running into you again.” She smiled, a little on the bashful side, tucking blonde strands behind her ear.

Really? That's not what you said the last time we saw each other.

“Nice to see you too, Alison.”

Lucy cleared her throat.

“You remember my friend Lucy?”

“Hello.”

Lucy tilted her drink at her, plastering on a smile. And now shit’s awkward. Not just for me, but for her and Lucy.

“Take care.”

She headed for the door and I took two steps towards her.

“Alison!”

She glanced at me over her shoulder, rewarding me another view of those blue eyes.

“Would you like to go out sometime?”

She nibbled her bottom lip for a moment. She’s either trying to let me off easy, or she’s considering it. I have my doubts about the second, but sure would make my afternoon.

“What do you have in mind?”

“A movie? Drinks after? Maybe this evening?”

She hesitated for a moment, her eyes scanning me over.

“Sure. The AMC River East. I can meet you there around 7.”

I smiled, shoving my hands into the pockets of my slacks.

“Is there a movie you would like to see?”

She shook her head.

“We can pick one out when we get there.”

The movie was a brilliant idea. No conversation, no chance for me to bring up something she wouldn’t recollect. Like our life together, our seven-year-old daughter, our house, the millions we’d have to split if she followed through with the divorce. A life I need to forget. I’m getting my do over. Even if it means missing my little girl.

When we talked, we discussed her career, how it felt when

my first book became a bestseller. She asked if I get recognized often, causing me to laugh since not once did someone walk over while we were together asking me if I'm Matthew Green, the author of *Missed Call* or *404*. I almost brought up what happened between us, the reason why she took out a restraining order, but there're things better left unsaid. If she isn't going to mention it, neither will I.

We took a stroll through the nearby park. I kept my hands to myself even though I wanted to grab hers. I only placed mine in the nape of her back when her foot slipped. We did a lot of laughing and yeah, a few times I almost brought up things I shouldn't. Like Hannah's favorite stuffed cat and the meltdown she had when she left it behind at the park close to our home. How we searched everywhere because she couldn't sleep without it. When it didn't turn up, and three sleepless nights later, we searched every store until we found one. When we tried to pass it off, Hannah already found Freckles. Or the night we conceived our daughter, we almost got caught skinny-dipping in the neighbour's pool. We never found her panties. I imagined the neighbour did though.

And it's hard. I know Alison. I know her imperfections, I know her quirks. I know she likes to nibble on her nail when she's reading something. How she bites her bottom lip when she's being flirty. And she used to know me.

"I had a great time." Alison said.

I chuckled.

"Don't sound so surprised."

She rewarded me with a soft laugh.

"When I agreed to go out with you, I wondered if I made the right decision."

I nodded, letting my eyes take in the sights. I'm not exactly sure what to say. How do I explain what I did? How I scared

her into taking a restraining order out on me?

Alison pushed up onto her tiptoes to place a kiss on the corner of my mouth. It's hard. Hard to keep my hands to myself, not to pull her towards me, and reminisce on the many ways we've made love.

"Would you like me to walk you to your car?"

Blonde strands of hair brushed against her cheek when the wind picked up, her hand automatically coming up to tuck it behind her ear.

"I took a cab."

I ran my hand over my chin. Dare I ask? Screw it. All she has to do is say no and I'll be on my way.

"I can give you a ride home."

Alison flashed me a smile, her blue eyes shining from the street lamp we are standing under. She reached for my hand, running her fingertips over my knuckles.

"That would be nice, Matt. Thank you."

chapter sixteen

Kaide Li

I LINGERED A LITTLE behind Alison as we walked up to her door, a strange feeling overwhelming me. Was it fear? No, it could not be. Our first date went well, fabulous in fact, if I might say so myself, even better than our first date the last time. There were literally sparks flying everywhere; they could have seared the people around us and we could not have noticed. Whatever was in the grand plan for our lives on this Earth, there must had been something in it for the both of us, together. It must had been the reason why I was able to come back and fix up my old timeline again, to get the stars aligned right this time. My eyes fixated on the small of her back, then wandered to the nape of her neck peeking from behind the hair she had kept swept to one side, to all those other familiar curves I used to hold...

"So, this is it." Alison turned around suddenly waving her arm at the door behind her, her bracelet jiggling a little, distracting me for a second and broke me out of my trance-like stare of her back. That bracelet... it looked like something I was going to buy her for one of our wedding anniversaries

but I did not do it in the end. The strange sensation came over me again. Was it a pang of guilt? Regret? Or was it just this being our first date and I was eager to find out whether she would be inviting me into her house?

"Aren't you going to invite me in?" I asked.

"There's nothing to see in there. Besides, it's such a mess, really." Alison seemed to fumble a little as she said that.

"I don't mind... There will be you to see and besides, I love a good mess." I replied with a sly smile on my face. I took several steps forward and backed Alison towards her door. I placed my left hand on the door behind her slightly above her head and gazed down into her eyes. She looked back up at me intently, her breathing increasing as I noticed her chest rise and fall more rapidly. Time seemed to have stopped as we stood frozen on the spot in silence except for the thumping of our hearts. What was wrong with our last marriage? How did we end up in divorce? I reached down desiring to kiss her lips but changed my mind at the last minute, giving her a badly planted quick peck on the cheek instead.

"Well, good night then!" I said abruptly and turned to leave. After I had gone for several paces, I heard the sound of running footsteps behind me. From the corner of my eye, Alison appeared and grabbed me by the arm.

"I guess you could come in for a cup of coffee." Alison called out as she caught her breath.

"For just one cup of coffee? How about two? How about..." I teased.

"You don't bargain with a lawyer. Those are my terms." Alison cut me off and replied in mock haughtiness. We both laughed. Linking her arm with mine, we walked back slowly together and paused outside her door once more. She turned to face me.

"As I've mentioned, my house, it's kind of in a mess... Also, I don't live alone..." Alison spoke slowly, as if she were searching for the right words to say. For a lawyer, she did not seem particularly smooth and at ease with words tonight. It was like she wanted to hide something from me yet felt that I should know about it. She dug around her bag, took out her keys and waved them in front of me.

"Are you ready?" Alison asked softly.

"I'm ready." I whispered. I was not sure why I answered with such seriousness. Perhaps it was because of the way Alison had asked it, her quiet tone, like it was something I needed to give some thought to and to be prepared for. Or perhaps it was because I had wanted to see how she had been living in this timeline without me.

As Alison pushed open the door, a musty smell filled my nostrils. She walked around and flipped on an overhead lamp, flooding the living room with an amber glow that was just sufficient to see your way around with but barely enough to read the print on the newspapers left at the countertop with a stack of unopened letters without straining one's eyes. The furniture in the house was sparse with just two sofas in the middle of the living room, their fabric clearly worn out and even torn in some places due to age and use. A coffee table sat between them with one corner of the glass broken off into fragments and taped back together. There were few other items in the house. In fact, it was impossible for them to have collectively even formed any type of a mess.

Alison looked embarrassed and uncomfortable when she saw the expression on my face. She stood still by the door where I must have stopped, surprised with a tinge of shock at the spartan state of her house. I went inside quickly before she thought I was being rude.

"The heater had broken down for a while now but I haven't had the time to get it fixed." Alison said, as if by way of explaining the weird musty smell. They must not have opened the windows in a while.

"Don't worry, we'll heat things up in a while." I chuckled, reaching out to pull Alison close. She laughed uneasily and pushed me away.

"I'll go get you your coffee as promised."

"Shaken, not stirred, please." I called out after her as she disappeared into what was probably her kitchen.

"Make it yourself!" She shouted back.

Just as I was about to follow Alison into the kitchen, I saw something on the shelves which piqued my interest. There was a neat row of kids' drawing, proudly framed and signed, "BY: HANNAH" in block letters at the bottom corner. One was a picture of a cat or was it a tiger? Another was a family of three holding hands with probably little Hannah in the middle together with her parents and huge beaming smiles on all of their faces.

"I didn't know you collect." I joked and gestured towards the framed drawings as Alison came back out from her kitchen with two mugs of hot coffee. I was not sure if she heard what I said. If she did, she made no attempts to reply. Wordlessly, she walked towards the coffee table, set down the two mugs of coffee and settled into the far end of the sofa. I went over to sit beside her. I sank into the cushion the moment I sat down, there was hardly any support. Before I could say another word, she pushed a steaming mug of coffee towards my face.

"Don't say anything. Let me speak first." At first, Alison looked me in the eyes but then she lowered her gaze to her hands rested on her lap and started fiddling with them.

"I...", Alison began but trailed off and then started talking again. "I haven't had such an enjoyable night as tonight's had been in a long, long while. I really had fun and it was nice talking to you. You seem like such a sweet person. I hope it's not just me but I feel that there's some good chemistry going on between us, it's almost electrifying and I feel it in my skin."

"I felt it too." I blurted out, put down the mug and took both of Alison's hands in mine but she brushed them off and continued.

"This is just our first date and I had a magical time. A part of me doesn't want to say things that will sabotage this relationship. Yet, I believe that I need to be honest with you in order to bring this relationship to the next level, if you have the same intention..." Alison finally glanced up at me again.

"Of course I do! When do we start? Here, on this couch?" I shoved my face into her entire line of sight.

"Will you please be serious for a moment?"

"Yes, sorry... You were about to tell me something important."

"As I was saying, I'm actually..."

"A man!"

"No!"

"A criminal on the run?"

"NO!"

"A.."

"WILL YOU PLEASE LISTEN TO ME FOR A SECOND?" Alison shouted out and a deafening silence followed immediately after. I guess I took the joke too far and decided it was safer to stay mute for a while. She glared at me and her cheeks looked flush. I just wanted to make her feel more relaxed and comfortable. That kind of backfired. After a short moment of evidently trying to calm herself down,

resuming with her fiddling, she spoke again.

"I'm actually married but we divorced a few years ago."

"Okay... I have no problem with that. That was in the past. Do you have any..." I was not sure why but I actually felt afraid to ask.

"Yes, we have a daughter, Hannah. She's seven years old now and she lives with me."

I quietly contemplated about the fresh pieces of news laid out in front of me. I surely had not thought that she might actually be married in this timeline. Well, currently divorced but still once married. Married to someone else. Someone else that was not me. And they had a child. A girl named Hannah. The very same name as our daughter, Hannah. And the same age too. Were she not supposed to marry me? I caught myself in my thoughts and reminded myself that they were divorced. We were the ones having a good time now. Our paths were now crossed, everything was as it were meant to be.

"I am fine with all that. I had a wonderful time with you too and that is all that matters." I reassured her and took her hands in mine again. This time, she did not resist. We locked eyes for a moment but that connection was rudely broken suddenly by the ringing of the doorbell. Alison jumped up from the sofa.

"That must be the babysitter bringing Hannah home." Alison absentmindedly ran her fingers through her hair and hurried over to open the door. I looked over from where I was seated, wondering if I should join her at the door. Would I scare the kid or perhaps it was me who was worried? Cautiously, I stood up and walked over to the side where I could peek out the door without being easily noticed.

"Hi Mrs Forde, I brought little Hannah home. She had a short nap earlier but I think she's ready to sleep some more."

Hannah was still holding the babysitter's hand in one hand and rubbing her eyes with another. Why was Alison still using her husband's name? Alison bent down, ruffled her daughter's hair and gave her a peck on the forehead. She thanked the babysitter and led Hannah back into the house.

"Aren't you a sleepy girl?" Alison cooed and tried to tidy up her hair which she had just ruffled into tangles earlier. Hannah raised her arms up and wrapped them around her mother's waist, resting and snuggling her head against her stomach. Watching the warm sight before me, I had a sudden urge to rush over and put them both in my embrace, like how the three of us used to, Alison, our daughter, Hannah and I. As I went closer, a weird sense of familiarity hit me. This Hannah, daughter of Alison and her ex-husband, looked so remarkably like my dear Hannah, OUR Hannah, the Hannah whom Alison and I had. How was this possible? It was one thing to go back in time but surely Alison's daughter with another man shouldn't look so much like our daughter? My chest tightened unbearably as a thought came to mind. Unless... unless my dear Hannah was not my dear Hannah but Alison's love child with another man. She had been cheating on me behind my back with this Forde guy! How could she! Just moments ago I had wanted to stay and keep Alison close but now, all those held-back emotions had dissipated. I only felt a sense of betrayal and a rising temper inside me. I must leave immediately before I holler at Alison and scream out all the hurt she had caused me. I must keep it in. Not in front of innocent Hannah. I HAD TO LEAVE NOW.

"I see Hannah's tired. I better go and leave the two of you." I started taking large strides towards the door without a second glance at them, muttering under my breath to stay cool.

"But you haven't even finished your coffee." Alison tried to come over towards me with Hannah in tow but I was already outside in a few swift steps, the door behind me. I took in a few deep breaths of the chilly night air. Then, I started walking. I had to get away. I needed some time to clear my thoughts. I wandered around aimlessly, not caring where I was headed, the same thoughts recurring in my mind over and over again. Was our Hannah mine? Did Alison cheat on me with this Forde guy then? If she did, why did she do it? I could not think straight and finally slumped onto a park bench and clutched my head with my hands in defeat. It seemed to me then that I was wrong. Our destinies were in fact like two parallel lines, meant to travel together and not meant to cross.

chapter seventeen

Cassandra Lee Yieng

I PACED BACK AND forth outside my dear friend's apartment. I should have been here half an hour earlier, but for the train delay.

The walls of this corridor sported the yellow of sunflowers, but the doors were raincloud grey. Such interior decor unsettled me: Should I appear cheerful or gloomy? Both? Neither? Dust gathered on the black marble floor, and I dared not kick it lest I banged my toes against the dreary wall. Better leave things the way they were than make a fuss and get into needless trouble.

Next to Lucy's door was a huge embossed "36", a solemn reminder of my age. Two stretches of twenty-four years weren't enough to figure out why she liked this wacky-looking place. This was not the first time I visited her as an adult, but my hands slid in and out of my jacket pockets, getting sweatier with each movement. Since I didn't want careless words to ruin our friendship, what should I say to her? Why couldn't I still the nagging throbs in my ribcage? Being my best friend in two separate times in my disjointed life didn't mean that

ephemeral, euphoric, distracting emotions had a place in our friendship. I mustn't let her become another Alison.

The knob turned. The door opened, a small gap first, then wide open to reveal Lucy in a woollen business suit fitting for her small build and wiry frame. Her almond locks — tempting me to fondle them — were fingers caressing her shoulders, perhaps massaging them. Thanks to allergies, almond was the only nut-like substance I could eat. *For goodness's sake stop thinking of your own body parts for one second will you*, I berated myself. My perspiring hands wiped against my awkward cheeks, the moisture too meagre to extinguish the blaze inside me.

“I was about to leave.” Lucy patted her ash-coloured laptop bag. “A big client...”

“I'm sorry—”

“Don't. I'll make you coffee. Quick. Come in.”

I followed her into her apartment and sat upright on her cream-coloured sofa. Unlike the corridor, her abode exploded with bright and contrasting colours. Tartan patterns covered every wall, table, chair, cupboard and surface. Next to the front door was a teak dressing table, on top of which is a speckless mirror. Draped across the back of the sofa was a brown-and-orange afghan woven from camel's hair, warm to the touch. The forest-themed curtains featured curious brown sparrows chirping to one another. I averted their bright, beady eyes, which reminded me of fierce passions I dared not feel in Lucy's presence. On the deep blue terrycloth carpet, a school of clownfish swam. Upon closer inspection, they were all smiling — a facial expression I didn't feel like making.

A blob of wetness landed smack dab on my chest, staining my periwinkle shirt. I took off my suit jacket and flicked the switch on the oil heater — white metal panels sandwiching air

and emitting heat by radiation. The three modes of heat transfer were new concepts I picked up when I relived my teenage years. In my second go at adolescence, I chose the science stream instead, having witnessed the dominance of engineering and technology in the previous twenty-first century.

Lucy emerged from her kitchen and handed me a small cylindrical cup of espresso. Patterns of red, ripe cherries graced the porcelain.

I gulped down the coffee. No time to waste.

“Got to catch a train,” said Lucy. “Care to join me?”

“How about this?” I raised the tiny mug.

“Fill it with tap water and set it aside in the sink.”

I did as told. When I glanced at the stain on my shirt again, it had faded. So much for my parents bringing up my lack of observational skills. I found the heater by myself and used it to good effect. Someone please pat me on the back for being such a smart boy.

A shriek. “Matt?”

I dashed out of the kitchen. What happened? I didn’t hear glass break. I didn’t leave a pile of junk or manure behind. What had gone awry?

Lucy was sitting in front of her mirror, her keys on the dressing table and her laptop next to her chair. She wiped her forehead with a handkerchief, smearing it red and black and red and black. When she turned around, I gasped and staggered backwards. Her makeup appeared to be melting.

Her smudged face glared at me, gritting her teeth. “Did you turn on the oil heater?”

We strode out of the lift into the streets. Lucy strutted along the sidewalk.

“You. I spent an hour redoing my face.”

“I’m sorry,” I said.

A white bus passed by, drowning out Lucy’s angry reply. I wasn’t sure how to react. To be honest, even if I’d heard her, I still would’ve been at a loss for words. Amid the honking cars and pedestrians mesmerised by their phones, she ranted until we reached the Jackson Street entrance to Union Station. By now her face was no longer red and her eyes had relaxed. She seemed to have calmed down.

“The other day I saw someone reading a book with your name on it,” said Lucy. “Was it by you?”

“Title?”

“*Democracy’s End*.”

“Well.” I heaved a sigh. “That one. The black sheep.”

“You’re a novelist?”

“Just scraping by.”

We took the escalators downwards, towards the trains. She was on one escalator and mine was next to hers.

“How did you learn to write fiction?”

“The Iowa Writer’s Workshop.”

Lucy and I stopped by a sandwich outlet. She ordered a chicken and bacon sandwich. I offered to pay for her, but she held up her hand and handed her cash over. She took the sandwich and whipped out her phone. She didn’t want to talk to me, I was sure.

She showed me the website of the Workshop. “It’s an intensive graduate programme. Didn’t you complain of a lack of time?”

“It happened in *Take One*.” I was referring to my previous life. “How else could I have come up with two bestsellers by the time I was twenty-two in *Take Two*?”

“The perks of having a second chance.”

“I wish we each had a flute of champagne to celebrate that.”

We smirked and entered the glass doors leading into the Union Station where the clock and schedule displays were.

“Do you miss being married?” Lucy said.

“Don’t bring her up. She hated me for spending my time there instead of with... Hannah.”

“Do you? I mean, the experience of marriage.”

“Maybe early in the mornings. I would nudge her and say, ‘Hey, baby, you awake?’ and she would return a scowl. Now nobody’s in my bed to make such silly faces. Or noises. I’m terrified of silent mornings.”

Hot tears gathered in my eyes, threatening to gush out if I weren’t careful enough. I tilted my head upwards, away from the crowds in business attire rushing every which way. My eyes gazed at the wide square grid above me into what little cloudy sky above, wishing that a bird’s droppings could penetrate the glass, fall on me and prevent me from crying. But I had to hide unwanted emotions. My fists balled up. At least a tantrum would have brought me relief, but I didn’t want to cause a scene in public. Or hurt Lucy, whom I might have come to like, might have. I had to be like the army general I added last minute to my books, the one who couldn’t cry because of severed tear ducts.

I took a deep breath. “Thank goodness things are finally over with her. I’ve wasted far too much of two lifetimes on that woman.”

We found seats outside the eateries. Lucy munched her sandwich.

“I wish Alison would leave my mind alone, but—have I told you how I started my first company, the auditing one, when I was eighteen?”

Lucy shook her head, biting off the end of her sandwich.

“I think I told someone else that it was a shell company from some accounting law firm. It was Alison’s. I bought it from her. Even though the business tanked, I had learned the ropes. So when I founded subsequent companies, they earned so much I sold them at a profit. Carodine Capital found me through a mutual connection and hired me to cherry-pick companies for their portfolios. But in fact our mutual connection was Alison too. So I can’t escape from her shadow anywhere.”

“Why do you want her back?”

“My life isn’t complete without her,” I said. “She was a witty person and we had chemistry, but she wanted me to be more ambitious. She was the reason I published so many books and ran so many successful businesses. I wanted to earn her love.”

“Love cannot be earned.” Lucy scrunched the paper used to wrap her sandwich. “Wake up, Matt. Alison never loved you at any point.”

I hid my face in my palms. She mustn’t see me cry. I wished Lucy was less blunt in her delivery.

Lucy continued, “You have your parents. They’re still alive. And you have me.” She leaned close and dropped her voice to a whisper. “You have a place in my heart.”

“A place?” I said, glancing about. “Could it be the urinal?”

She burst out laughing and slapped my wrist. “How dare you suggest that!”

I froze. Dust was not meant to be kicked.

“Every night I can’t sleep because thinking of you makes me giddy.” She clasped her hands in mine and they trembled. “The truth is: I’ve... I’ve always loved you.”

“You know, you remind me of the title of my mum’s

favourite TV series.”

“Which one?”

“I Love Lucy.” I supposed I was the first man on earth stupid enough to declare his love with a sitcom title.

“Look, I have been crushing on you since I was fourteen...”

This was good news of great joy. An opportunity to banish the dreaded ex from my mind. “Shall we have dinner tonight?” I said.

Lucy’s smart watch buzzes. Her brows knotted.

“Lucy?”

“But I’m a grown woman now.” She pursed her cherry-red lips. “I’m afraid not.”

“I’ll wait for you here after you finish work—”

“I said no. You’re not asking me out. Ta.”

“Some other time, how about?”

But she made a beeline for the train without turning back to say goodbye. The glass doors shut behind her. Right after her entry into the train, its doors closed.

My phone buzzed. Her message: “I’m late for work because of you.”

When she said she had always loved me, I thought she would comfort me when I failed in my quest to regain Alison. Listen to my deepest, darkest secrets and say something to encourage me. Replace Alison and bring me the happiness I longed for.

I was wrong.

chapter eighteen

Marc Cooper

IMAGINE AN AIRCRAFT HITTING a mountain. The sound of its grinding destruction. We only ever see the terrible aftermath, and that's enough to stuff our imagination with the terror. All of these things happened in my head when Wilma switched on the vacuum.

“You need to get your ass into gear,” Wilma yelled over the din, stabbing a finger at me. “Get your ass off that couch, and yourself out of here. You hear me young fellah?”

Wilma had been my backstop and partner in survival for the past ten years or so. She cooked and cleaned and generally took care of the place, and kicked my ass when she felt it needed kicking. Absent a delicate touch, Wilma cleared her path in the world by simply being there; that and a voice that could not be denied. She'd raised eight boys as a single mother, so I registered somewhere between breathing and walking on her scale of difficulty. She was the only living soul I would not cross.

The room was more of a mess than usual. I'd been working up to dating Lucy, and when she flicked me off, I

thought the best way to deal with it would be a night of alcohol, weed, and the company of those happy to spend my money in exchange for their company. If I got laid, that would be a bonus; I had no recollection of that happening.

The vacuum approached menacingly, so I hauled my ass off the couch and into the kitchen and shut the door. Evidently, Wilma had passed through and the reek of pine disinfectant burned at my eyes and throat. Cleaning the kitchen before waking me in the living room was the kind of thing Wilma did to show her affection. I saw it for what it was and felt the love.

The vacuum fell silent and Wilma burst into the kitchen.

“You been flushing your protection again,” she said casually. “I’m glad you doing right by your girl, but you gonna cause a blockage beyond the u-bend. I told you before. And it’s me that gets to fix it, and I have to call in that Mr Fuseblower, and I don’t much like him.”

When a grown man blushes to the point of sweat, he knows he’s out of his league. I mumbled an apology.

“So, where is Lucy?” Wilma went on.

“Not here. She knocked me back. I invited some friends round to party—”

“I can see that. Well, what’re ya gonna do about it? She’s a lovely girl, and she likes you. That’s clear to me. Lord knows, stranger things happen.”

“I missed my chance. All I ever wanted—”

“Yes, you’ve told me a hundred times: a lovely wife and child and a simply life. That ain’t your life; but you’ve time to make it. No point you living in a fantasy world even if you do go through this one like a dragon sleeping on his horde of gold.”

“Not sure what else I can do.”

Wilma's eyes narrowed, and I felt a stabbing behind my forehead, like she was burrowing into my skull with a corkscrew.

"Go big," said Wilma. "Do something no-one else would think of. Make it about her. It's one thing to tell her you care. It's another to show her. You've got the connections and the means."

"And you think that will work?"

"Sure, if you don't foul it up. So, there's an outside chance."

Within an hour, showered and fed, I was round at Clive's house cooking up Wilma's Lucy recipe. Clive and I had known each other since school, and it was together at our first startup that we made our first million. Between us, we knew every tech entrepreneur worth their salt. We'd mentored most, invested in many, and sat on the boards of a few. We made money together, mostly, but underneath we retained a love for exploiting tech in crazy ways. We knew the best would be up for a challenge. The idea we settled on came from Clive. We called it *The Grand Tour*. After we had a name, we started making the calls.

By early evening, we had a blueprint and the go ahead from all the main players. A few kinks needed straightening out and simplifying, but it was clear that the tech was available, albeit used in curious ways.

Over the next two weeks, we built the Grand Tour. Most of the pieces could be tested in isolation, which simplified things, and so special attention was given to the boundaries. With specialists deployed in every area, the quality was high, and the rate of progress astonishing.

After a fortnight, I was given the green light – the Grand

Tour was ready – and so I called Lucy to make a date.

“Matt, I thought we’d put the dating thing to bed. So to speak.”

“This isn’t dating. It’s just going out.”

“So other people will be there?”

“In a manner of speaking. Yes, they will.”

“And it’s just one night?”

“It’s a few hours in the middle of the day. I want to show you that you are special to me, and that I’m prepared to go that extra mile for you.”

“As a friend?”

“As a friend, of course,” I lied.

On the day of the Grand Tour, the sun rose and remained the only blemish in the blue sky. Then, half an hour before midday, an autonomous stretched limo rolled up my drive and threw open a rear door.

The car had been built by Billy’s company, Snesla, which specialised in multipurpose autonomous vehicles. A young genius, eager to break new ground, and with an uncontainable ego, Billy was central to the success of the Grand Tour, and he planned to squeeze everything he could from it. It was hard to like Billy, but he always delivered, which made him hard to walk away from.

“I hope you got more than a shiny black car to impress the lady,” said Wilma. “Them elastic cars look awful kitsch to me. Ugly as Hell. Wouldn’t find me inside one.”

“Plenty more, Wilma, I promise.”

“Well, that’s good then. Now, let’s take a look at you.” She flicked an imaginary blemish from my lapel. “You look pretty enough, sweetheart. You’ll do.”

“Thanks, Wilma.”

I kissed her on the cheek and went out to the car.

We circled Lucy's block until midday then picked her up. She looked far prettier than me in her summer clothes and somehow managed to look simultaneously formal and casual. Some women can do that, I've noticed. Men, not so much.

The car pulled away, and I quickly took a selfie of the two of us sitting in the back seat. In the picture, Lucy managed to create a "just friends" look despite our proximity. She'd allowed me a peck on the cheek on arrival, but otherwise an invisible yet tangible barrier remained.

Billy, who was watching us via a concealed camera somewhere in the vehicle, messaged me: "Nice chick, man!!!!!" See what I mean about Billy?

"So, where to?" said Lucy, who was watching nothing in particular out of the window.

"Thunderpidgeon."

"The theme park?"

Being on my best behaviour, I didn't say, "Is there another Thunderpidgeon?", but instead, "The very same."

Lucy continued to look out of the window.

We soon arrived at Thunderpidgeon and drove through its main gates with the vehicle slowed to a walking pace. A security guard in a sharp red and blue uniform and white hat saluted us into the park rather unnecessarily. I suspect that was Billy's doing.

We weaved through the park, which annoyed some of those on foot, who thumped on the sides of the vehicle to make their feelings heard. Billy messaged a suggestion of what I should say to them, but I thought it better not to. Lucy looked agitated.

"Here!" I said, as we pulled up at the Monster Death ride.

Lucy was looking up at the massive steel framework and

about to speak when the front, back and sides of the vehicle slowly peeled away and dropped onto the grass. This left the cocoon or cabin in which we were seated. The cabin moved forward onto the ride's tracks, and then the ride began to pull us into the sky.

"What? How?" said Lucy.

"A bit of Billy and a bit of Eric," I said.

At that moment, the seatbelts tightened and pulled us both back tightly, and a bar sprung up from the floor and settled in our waists.

"I don't like rollercoasters," said Lucy.

This discovery demonstrated a flaw in my planning. I realised this immediately due to the piercing sensation in my heart. I felt sad for Lucy, and I felt sad for myself, because the right thing to do was to hit the emergency stop button. I didn't want to because there was so much more of the Grand Tour to see.

"I'll stop the ride," I said sadly.

"Thank you," said Lucy with the brightest smile I'd seen on her that day.

Here I discovered another flaw in my planning. The large, bright red emergency stop button sat there in front of us, but it was far out of reach now that we were clamped into our seats. Lucy watched me struggle in my attempt to reach it and quickly understood the situation.

"Oh shit!" she said, because we had reached the top of the climb and were about to be hurled into an extended virtual free fall.

Billy messaged a long stream of crying face emojis, which was most unhelpful at the time.

The ride itself, I found, was very exciting. I missed having the wind in my face, cocooned as we were, and I missed

waving my arms in the air, feigning an absence of fear. I did manage to take a couple of selfies, though.

Lucy, for her part, screamed with all the might her lungs could muster. She was utterly terrifying to hear.

Despite these initial setbacks, I remained hopeful that the remaining part of the Gran Tour would win Lucy around.

Thunderpidgeon sits on the coast, and part of the Monster Death ride extends into the sea. As we hurtled downward once more, this time into the water splash, Lucy screamed again until the cabin hit the water and slowed dramatically, which stopped her screaming due to the expectation that the ride was soon to be over. For a moment, Lucy turned to me with a look on her face I'd never seen before – and I'd known her for a long time. That moment ended when she noticed that the cabin hadn't passed through the water and out the other side, but was now fully submerged beneath it.

"Submarine," I said quickly, hoping to calm any fear Lucy may have.

"Oh," said Lucy, which was music to my ears – despite them ringing on their own account.

With a clunk, the vehicle's wheels were discarded and the cabin shot forward and, mercifully, the waist bar retreated into the floor and the seatbelts relaxed.

"I can hit the emergency stop button now, if you like," I said.

"No, it's okay," said Lucy. "This is amazing."

The sun provided plenty of light at our shallow depth, and from the windows we watched shoals tumble and the teeming life of the ocean floor. Crabs scuttling, octopus searching, small fish darting and hiding.

After half an hour of exploring (a route carefully planned and programmed), the submarine headed a short way out to

sea. The added depth brought more movement in the water, but by then we believed we were experienced mariners at one with the sea; that's the kind of tranquillising effect the ocean has on people.

To add to our delight, a pod of dolphins took interest in us and swam alongside; nudging us curiously, making eye contact, and clicking excitedly. Lucy looked ecstatic. I was ecstatic for Lucy.

Soon after, the submarine came up beside a floating platform and, looking behind us, I could see the Monster Death ride which now looked quite puny. A mechanical arm stretched out from the platform and attached two weather balloons onto the roof of the submarine. As the arm retreated, the balloons took effect and, with a jolt, the submarine – no longer a submarine – lifted from the sea into the sky.

We began to rise faster, and soon only the larger features on the ground were visible. Still we rose. The curvature of the Earth became clear, and then the blue layers of the atmosphere started to emerge.

In my excitement at our surroundings and at Lucy's silence, I hadn't noticed she was sitting impassively with her eyes tightly shut.

"Are you okay?" I said.

"Are we going to die?"

I leaned forward and pressed the emergency stop button. Nothing happened, so I pushed it again; a bit harder. Then again harder still. Lucy, hearing my thumping, opened her eyes and, once again, immediately grasped our predicament.

"We're going to die!" she howled. "I don't want to die!"

I tried to converse with her a little, but she just kept repeating those two phrases. I explained that, I too, did not

want to die, but it didn't make a difference to her.

We kept rising, and the views were ever more spectacular. I confess that I hadn't expect the journey to be quite as long nor quite as high. In any case, at the designated altitude, the balloons were automatically jettisoned and the cabin went into free fall. At this point, Lucy began to scream once more.

I tried to explain to her the finer points of our current situation, and that we were in a controlled free fall. This stopped her screaming for an instant, during which her eyes told me all the things she wished upon me, and even I could tell they weren't nice things. That done, she returned to screaming. Even after the parachute opened, and we floated gently to Earth – into a field of golden wheat, no less – Lucy could not be silenced until the cabin was entirely still; whereupon she passed out, so I placed her in the recovery position on the floor of the cabin to keep her out of the sun, and I gently wetted her lips now and then.

Half an hour later, the team arrived to pick us up – a couple of Humvees and a recovery truck for the cabin. They made a mess of the crops, and I didn't feel good about that. Lucy was sitting up by this time, although she hadn't spoken a word to me. Then, as I helped her from the cabin to one of the Humvees, Lucy stood apart a little from me and slapped me hard across the face. She didn't say anything – she didn't need to – she barely looked at me. Seemed harsh to me, but I let it go.

While we were loading the cabin onto the truck, the farmer arrived. He was furious about the damage to his crops and demanded compensation. The guys just laughed at him, so he picked up his shotgun from the back of his truck and blew out the windows of the nearest Humvee. Thankfully, Lucy was in the other one. I spoke to the farmer and said I'd pay for the

damage, and he seemed pacified a little, but his eyes were still wild, so we got out of there as quick as we could.

Billy was furious about his windows being shot out. I couldn't find much sympathy in myself for him, though.

I had the guys drop me and Lucy at the hospital. I wanted her checked out, because she still wasn't one hundred percent.

After an hour or so, the doctor came and told me that Lucy had some sort of traumatic stress reaction, which was not the result I was aiming for at the end of the date. The doc said he'd seen worse cases, which didn't make me feel any better; though I had to admit to myself that I'd had a great time, and I guess that says something about me that I should think about.

They let me visit Lucy, as long as I was quick. I knew she was in the best place, but I wanted to reassure her. Maybe I was reassuring myself, I don't know. She was calmed some by the drugs, her eyes were back to normal, although sadder than usual. She told me she really did love me once, but it was the other Matt. This Matt is too different, even if he is very much the same in many ways. She said it would be best if we didn't see each other again and, although I don't fully understand why, I can see it a bit from her side, and I can see why that's not enough.

chapter nineteen

G.B. Retallack

THIRTY-SIX WAS NOT a good age for me.

Last time around, I lost my wife and my daughter at thirty-six. Not to mention the rest of my life — no thirty-seven for that Matt Green!

I thought things would be different this time. Different career, different life path, and someone different to love. Lucy. The same Lucy I'd left in the dust in my first life, now my best friend and, I'd thought, a lot more.

I was wrong. The minute I told her how I actually felt, how I wanted to move forward with our relationship, she pulled away. Not harshly or abruptly, of course, just sadly. Even before she spoke, I knew what she was going to say. I'd broken some unspoken contract. We couldn't see each other any more. She smiled at me so gently I felt my heart would implode. Then she kissed me on the forehead and walked away.

I stayed and drank until closing time. I didn't remember getting in a cab, but I must have, because I woke up in my own bed, hungover and disoriented. I just lay there for a while,

chasing after the tendrils of my dreams. Dreams of Alison, mostly, although sometimes Lucy, sometimes the two of them morphing back and forth, reaching for me, smiling, crying. Walking away.

I slung myself out of bed. Forced myself to focus on the day ahead. There was nothing I could do about the past. About either past, in point of fact. It was time to let it all go and work on the future.

Maybe this time I'd make it to thirty-seven.

I padded to the bathroom and had a long shower and a shave. I considered the man in the mirror and decided he looked pretty good for a guy pushing forty. Certainly a hell of a lot better than the pale, pudgy accountant who had become too complacent and ended up losing it all. Losing Alison. Losing Hannah.

Enough.

I threw on some slacks and an old sweater and headed down to my study. I'd found out early on that being a writer meant you had to write. A lot. Especially when you had a signed book deal, complete with a deadline. My agent was already nagging for some draft chapters. I'd made it a firm rule to get in at least four hours of writing every morning, and another four either in the afternoon or evening, depending on my schedule. So I sat myself down at the computer. I stared at the screen for long while before I managed to get a grip. I started typing.

I filled a lot of screens with a lot of words over the next few hours. To this day, I don't know what. I never bothered checking.

Lunch time finally rolled around, and I could legitimately give it up. More than anything, I just wanted to get out of the house, take a walk, go have some lunch. Anything but rattle

around inside.

I went up to the bedroom to pick out some clothes. A cream linen shirt shot with minuscule threads of butter yellow. *To emphasise the tan, Lucy had patiently explained.* A pewter grey Savile Row suit in summer-weight wool *to show off your lovely shoulders and trim waist.* A silk tie of Delft blue. *Resonates with your eyes.* And finally a pair of thousand-dollar trainers to show how hip and individualistic I was.

Suddenly, I couldn't remember the point of it all. I already had more money than God, certainly enough for a single guy to live on quite comfortably. And single, apparently, was what I was going to be.

Unless there's another accident. The thought ambushed me out of nowhere. I almost stopped breathing. What if my life was in some kind of endless loop? So far, age thirty-six was batting 1-for-1. What if it all happened again, and I wake up as a twelve-year-old and have to do those twenty-four years all over?

What would happen to Alison and Hannah? As long as I was around, I could keep an eye on them, make sure they were okay. But what if I disappeared again? I felt panic setting in, like I was running out time. I stood frozen in the closet for a long minute. And then I tore it all off. Popped a few buttons from the shirt. Maybe ripped the tie. Who the fuck cared? Why should I look like one of those pop-successful guys who only live to work? I was a writer, for God's sake, not an investment banker! It was time to start looking like one.

I grabbed a pair of black jeans and a blue V-neck that (yes, Lucy) brought out the colour of my eyes. Black calfskin boots. A light nylon jacket in case the weather turned.

I stood back and examined the results in the mirror. With a shock of surprise, I realised it looked really good. *I looked*

good. Maybe this was the new me for the new future.

A weight seemed to fall from my shoulders. This whole thirty-six thing didn't have to be all doom and gloom. For the first time in twenty-four years, the future was uncharted territory. I could choose to bury it prematurely under the past, or I could grab it with both hands and go for the ride.

I chose the ride.

But first, I had things to do. I didn't know if there would be another accident, but I couldn't afford to wait and find out. Alison might not my wife in this time, and Hannah was someone else's daughter, but I still needed to make sure they would be alright, no matter what happened. And fortunately, I had the means to do it.

My first call was to my investment broker. I'd never worried about how much money he was making for me — the original capital was more than enough to carry me through, even without the very comfortable revenue from the books. Now, however, I needed to confirm that what I wanted to do would actually work.

I listened to fifteen minutes of the Edward Jones company's banal telephone music before Frank came on the line. I told him what I wanted and asked if I was generating enough annual cash flow to do it. He laughed.

"Mr. Green," he said. "You can do triple that easily. More if I realign your portfolio."

"No, that's fine. I'll let you know when everything's finalised, and we can start scheduling the transfers."

"Sounds good," he replied, and hung up. Time really is money for some folks.

With that taken care of satisfactorily, I put in a call to my lawyer, Gordon Naugler. More wretched on-hold music. But at least he was in the office today. You never knew with lawyers.

“Naugler,” he responded at last.

“Gordon, it’s Matthew Green.”

“Matty! Nice to hear your voice. What can I do for you?”

He was never one for chit-chat.

“I need to talk to you about something. Can you do lunch?”

He hemmed and hawed and finally allowed that he might manage a short one around 1:30. I said I’d make a reservation and let him know the location, and we hung up. A couple more calls and I’d booked us a patio table at the Acanto restaurant, not far from Gordon’s LaSalle Street offices. It had a spectacular view of the park and the kaleidoscope of people that flowed through and around it. I texted him the details and headed out. There was still tons of time, but I wanted to clear my head, and nothing was better for that than a brisk walk.

I loved Chicago in May, especially days like this one — blue skies, a high of 70°, and a light breeze to ruffle the fresh leaves. They’d already turned on the fountain in Millenium Park, the traditional signal that summer was on the way.

I got to the restaurant early, partly to enjoy some people-watching, but mostly to run through the plan again in my head. Gordon was a lovely man, but he doled out his time very small increments. It was a miracle he’d agreed to lunch at all, and I didn’t expect it would last very long. I had to get to and through the point as quickly as possible.

I ordered a bottle of Pouilly-Fumé, and was still sipping on the first glass when Gordon blew in.

“Matty!” he cried from ten feet away, startling some nearby diners. “How are you? You look great!” He extended his hand and I shook it.

“Can’t complain,” I said dutifully, and offered the next line in the established sequence. “Yourself?”

“Same old, same old,” he said. “You know how it is. You order yet?”

“No. I was waiting for you. You want some wine?”

He shook his head. “Water for me, I’m afraid. Day’s still far from over.”

We grabbed our menus and ordered quickly — risotto for him, lobster ravioli for me, salad for both.

“So,” he said, the moment the waiter left. “What’s this all about?”

“I want to open a trust fund.”

He raised his eyebrows but didn’t speak.

“The proceeds are to be paid out in the form of a full college scholarship. Tuition, books, accommodation, the whole works.”

“That’s pretty liberal, Matty. How much are we talking here?”

“Fifty-five thousand a year.”

He whistled and started to say something, but I cut him off. “Let me finish. It must look like it’s coming from some non-profit educational organisation who pulled a name at random from a pool of recommended candidates. You can make up a suitably vague corporate name, I’m sure.” He smiled faintly and nodded. I gave him the paper with Hannah’s name and contact information. “This is the lucky winner.” I sat back and waited for the questions.

“Where’s the money coming from,” was all he asked.

“Taken care of. Just let me know where and when to start sending the transfers.”

“No problem,” he said and stood up, ready to head back to his office.

“There is one more thing,” I said. He sat back down. I pulled out the other folded piece of paper from my pocket

and handed it to him. “I want you to open an account in your own name. I will deposit a million bucks in it as soon as it’s set up. In the event of my death, I want you to have a cashier’s cheque issued to that person for the full million. Any capital gains, you keep.”

“You’re putting a lot of trust in me,” he said evenly, but I suspected he was actually touched. He opened the paper. “Alison Broadly. Who is she?”

“Someone I care about a great deal. But like the other one, she can’t know this is coming from me. It has to look like an anonymous bequest from someone she helped in the past. She’s a lawyer too, so she’ll find lots of candidates among her previous clients. So, what about it?”

He shook his head, but it was more in wonder than negation. “It’s all very strange and mysterious, but basically straight forward from a legal perspective. I’ll have somebody draft everything up and have it couriered to you in the morning. That be alright?”

“Perfect,” I said, and meant it.

“Okay, then.” He checked his Rolex. “I gotta run. Talk to you soon.”

We shook hands again and he left. I finished my meal and sat sipping the Pouilly for a while. Then I paid up and headed back outdoors.

As I left the restaurant, I suddenly realised I was in better spirits than I had been in a very long time. There were still some ‘I’s to dot and ‘T’s to cross, but essentially it was a done deal. Hannah could go to college for as long as she chose to. In the event of my death (or apparent death, I reminded myself, thinking about the accident), Alison would receive the anonymous bequest. She’d undoubtedly spend a lot of time trying to figure out who it was from, but it didn’t matter. She’d

have the money.

And Lucy? Lucy would be sole beneficiary of everything apart from the investment fund. That might change at some point, but I'd make sure she would always be well looked after. She deserved that much.

Now that the wheels were all in motion, I was free for the rest of the day. No, it was more than that. I realised with a shock that I was felling really free, fundamentally free. Free of all the baggage, free of entanglements. Free to find out what age thirty-seven had in store for Matthew Green.

I rode the wave of euphoria through Millenium Park, stopping occasionally just to take it all in. I wandered around for a couple of hours, trying to get a handle this new feeling. Eventually, I decided it was time get myself home, so I headed over to Columbus and walked north across the bridge.

I was waiting for the light at East Lake Street to change when I caught sight of a familiar figure on the far side. It was Lucy, elegant as always in a grey-and-black striped pantsuit, her pale hair lifting in the breeze. My daydreams shattered and my heart almost stopped. I couldn't face her. Not yet. I was just about to walk away when she lifted her head and saw me. She hesitated, just for a moment, but it was enough for me to catch that fleeting look of panic. I recognized it very well. Then she smiled and the light changed and there she was, striding confidently across the crosswalk towards me. I marvelled again at how beautiful she really was.

And I couldn't help myself. I knew, better than most, the futility of trying to hang on when it was over. But this was still too fresh, too aching.

"You look so beautiful," I blurted, and watched her smile fade.